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FRIENDS

A DUET

ELIZABETH STEART PHELPS

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4

FRIENDS: A DUET.

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A DUET.

BY

ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS,

AUTHOR OF "THE GATES AJAR," "THE STORY OF AVIS," ETC., ETC.

"Either Death or a Friend." — PERSIAN PROVERB.

"May it be mine to keep the unwritten Laws!" — SOPHOCLES.

BOSTON:
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY.
The Riverside Press, Cambridge.
1881.

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RIVERSIDE, CAMBRIDGE:
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FRIENDS: A DUET.

I.

"Whatever 's lost, it first was won."
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

IT was a February day in Boston. It was going to rain. Though only four o'clock in the afternoon, the sense of night already overpowered the sense of day on the "morning side" of Mt. Vernon Street, whence the color of the sun had long since crept down the hill and lay low across Charles River and the intervening street, thrusting apart the gathering clouds with slips of light, long and pale, like slender hands.

A woman thought of this. She stood at her drawing-room window, looking up and down the hill. She held the curtain back from her figure with uplifted wrist, — a delicate wrist. She had stepped between the curtain, which was lace, and the window. Looking in, therefore, from without, as one passed through the darkening street,

she showed real and human. But looking at her from within, across the warm and silent room, the curtain swaying on her outline, she made a lovely ghost.

In either aspect of the watcher — for she was a watcher, that was plain enough — an observant person would have said of her, It is a wife, — a happy watcher, a happy wife.

Beyond those trifling signs of individuality in household art which creep into the homes of most people of character, there was nothing to distinguish this from other parlors on Mt. Vernon Street. It was not necessary to look twice to see that the lady behind the curtain had a luxurious and light-hearted home.

Something — was it in her attitude? was it in her expression? — would have indicated her to the sensitive eye as a woman deeply loving and deeply loved. Certainly she bore that beautiful and modest self-consciousness which belongs to no other creature and to no other condition, and which is as radiant and as regal as the look that the sea gives to the sunrise.

A gentleman came over the hill, walking slowly; he came from the direction of the State House and Tremont Street, and therefore held his

face turned towards the swiftly departing light. Drops were falling. They ran together on the window and thickened; the pavement was growing wet. It was a muggy night, and betokened either a prolonged thaw, or the sudden surrender of nature's forces which precedes a deadly chill. The gentleman walked languidly, as people do in weak weather; possibly he looked pale.

She had turned rapturously on hearing his step; then all her attitude fell. He passed beneath the window, she watching him. He glanced up once before he rang the bell, and saw her, between the curtain and the window, nodding down to him. She looked very near. She was still standing there, when he came into the room; only the pale lace now fell over her. He could but notice her contour on it, even then, with the high, fine crown of hair and the wrist turned back, — a beautiful wraith!

But when she came to meet him she saw how grave he was.

"Mr. Nordhall! I — thought you were John. I mean when I heard your step — at first. Sit down. I am glad to see you. But you look ill. John is late. I was watching for him."

"Yes, Mrs. Strong, John is late."

Nordhall said this clumsily enough. He too sat down. He felt faint. But she smiled up at him fondly; she had always known Charles Nordhall.

"You will stay to dine with us, now. John will soon be here. We were to read together this evening, early; I ordered dinner an hour sooner. We are reading — of all things, what do you think? — Paul and Virginia! We had never read it before, — together. John will be in very soon."

She laughed at herself, blushing a little, but thinking that it was only Charley Nordhall. She had a low and happy laugh. Yet he could see that she listened towards the pavement with the intensity by which only the very happy or the very miserable attend.

It had grown dark. Servants came in. Nordhall dimly saw the gas flash, and the colors of the room leap out; the hearth-rug where the dog lay, — listening, too. The rug was Persian; the dog a setter, brown and white. The tête-à-tête was of a garnet shade, and lustrous; it was rolled towards the grate, with a generous plump hassock before it, such as a tired man likes. An old copy of Paul and Virginia lay on the cushions of the tête-à-tête.

She sat between him and the fire, chatting in her sweet voice. Now and then she lifted the appealing eyes which contrasted so with the pose of her head. He did not know how to look at them. He heard her talking of the parlor lectures, of Thursday's concert, of the charity theatricals, of the Passion music, of what John said, of what John thought; and he saw her listening while she talked. But he did not know how to speak to her. It seemed to him that he had never seen her look so lovely. He noticed confusedly the color of the ribbon that she wore at her throat, under lace: it was rose-pink; it deepened, yet rendered more delicate, the flush of her cheek. He occupied himself with these details. She looked at him confidingly.

The room began to seem stifling to him, and he asked her permission to open a window. The rain was already freezing into sleet, as he looked out. When he returned, he saw that she had risen, and stood regarding him with an expression neither of inquiry, sympathy, nor fear alone, but partaking slightly of the nature of all. Then he knew that he could defer no longer. Unconsciously to himself he put out his hands to touch her; would have drawn her to her chair again. But she said, —

"You have something to tell me. You do not tell it!" She hesitated. "Do *you* know why John is late?"

Then he found his voice: "Yes, I know why John is late."

Nordhall was intoxicated by what we might call the wine of despair, at that moment, and deliriously regarding her as she stood there, thought of certain words he had read, — he could not for his life have said where or when: —

> "But ere the fatal stroke descended,
> Lifeless she fell."

For though he had not spoken, she put her hands together suddenly; he felt that all her face and figure crouched before him, and that the room rang to a cry which he should hear as long as he lived: —

"*Oh, my gracious God!*"

II.

"In the Desert, no one meets a friend." — ORIENTAL PROVERB.

THIS is not a tale of the fever of grief; it is not a study of the surprise of widowhood; nor will these pages be devoted to the analysis of agony.

We read often of the spasm of the volcano; much less of the slow processes of adjustment by which the purple lava hardens, and rivers of fire stiffen into waves of stone; still less, perhaps, of the efforts of kind nature to fling green things hopefully over frozen flames, and the blind confidence of human homes that trust and build above forgotten gulfs.

We hear much of the tumult of freshets in the uproar of the year; of the dash, the whirl, the shock, the watery dawn that rises thin and cold upon pathetic ruin. Do we study to learn as well of the patient renewals of life that follow, the slow gathering of wasted forces, the gradual restoration of land marks and symptoms of content,

the gravely rebuilt firesides by which forever ears must listen for the footsteps of the flood?

The story of Reliance Strong (such was her fine, Puritan inheritance of a name) is a short one and a quiet; worth telling more because it is like a great many other people's stories than because it differs from them. She loved her husband, and he was dead. Let us turn a leaf, as we push away sacred letters not our own, that we can but will not read. He had been dead a year.

It was a year that day. Charles Nordhall remembered, and he felt that he ought not to go to her; but his errand could not well wait. Since Mrs. Strong had moved out of town, these occasions would arise when he must consult her upon business of her own at short notice.

He left the train at Salem with a certain reluctance, and bade his driver travel slowly; he shrank from seeing her almost as much as he did a year ago.

She had asked his advice about moving to Salem to take care of her husband's mother. He had been more touched by her deference to his opinion than conscious of ability to give one. To decide upon almost any course of action for a friend in extremity, is like performing a surgical operation for which one has not been educated.

All places were alike to her, she had said. But Nordhall's sturdy instinct rebelled, and answered that all places were *not* like the silent house where Paul and Virginia lay unread upon the unpressed cushions.

He was not ill pleased when her heart turned towards the old homestead, the old mother, and the old-fashioned, passionless town. It was indeed some time before he allowed himself to think that this would make her a neighbor of his own.

She did not talk with him often nor much. There were a few qnestions about her husband's affairs. What did it mean to be executrix? Must she do this, or that? Was he to be her agent, and would he teach her how to manage wisely? Not that she cared for the money, but she wished to be regardful of all that John had earned and left for her. Then she would sit silent, and forget that he was there.

She had never required him to tell her the details of her husband's death. Having understood that there was an accident upon the railroad, she had asked no more. The circumstances were so painful that Nordhall felt a sad, abiding gratitude for the instinct by which she spared them both.

The house to which Nordhall drove was a mile, perhaps, from his own, in the direction of Marblehead and the open sea. It was a large wooden house, white, with dark-green blinds. It stood behind avenues of elm-trees and horse-chestnuts, bare now, and beating about in a northeast wind. A long garden ran behind and around the house; straw lay bound upon the buried flowers; patches of snow melted about the syringa bushes; the stalks of the frozen hollyhocks nodded at the visitor. Over the marshes the fog was starting in from sea. It was some distance to the sea. Established Salem families did not live in the surf, like people who came in summer, and could afford only a few weeks of salt breezes.

Old Mr. Strong had gone quite far enough out of town, as it was; but Winthrop L. Strong always did as he pleased, and he did not please (like Lamb) to favor "houses in streets." Of course, a gentleman would always have horses, and what did fifteen minutes to a neighbor signify? The two ladies therefore lived a somewhat secluded life.

As Nordhall stood hesitating whether to lift the heavy brass knocker, or to ring the bell, the fog stretched itself a little, and seemed to shut

the world out, and to shut him in against the closed door.

Mrs. Winthrop L. Strong came down with her daughter-in-law, to receive him; she always did. She spoke of the weather and the country, her pastor, her doctor, and her health, and asked if he had seen the Rollinstalls.

And then she invited him to tea, and begged him to excuse her, as she found it wearisome to sit up too long at a time, and had a little matter in preparation for the church charity society, which required her attention.

"She 's knitting socks," said Reliance, after the door was closed. "She always does."

"For every fair?"

"It is n't a fair. I think church people do not call them fairs? It is a Dorcas. They are baby socks. They are always blue. And so they all have to be given to the boy babies."

"I should think there might perhaps be — a superfluity?"

"Yes. Last year *every* Dorcas baby was a girl," added Reliance, gravely; "and it was very inconvenient. For you know a girl must wear pink always."

"No, I did n't know," said Nordhall.

"But mother is good," sighed Mrs. Strong. "I wish I were as useful!"

She paused. Thus, clumsily enough, they had got over the edge of the occasion. She used to be full of fun in her happy days. He inferred, of course, that she desired no allusion to the anniversary. He began at once: —

"I came to see you — to-day — because I must have your signature immediately. I think you must part with your Cicero and St. Thomas bonds. Suspicions of the management are afloat, and they have gone rapidly down. They were above par four days ago, but sell at 87¾ to-day.".

"Cicero and St. Thomas?" she asked, languidly. "Those are factories?"

"No; a railroad."

"Oh, I remember; a Southern railroad."

"The road is in Ohio," said Nordhall.

"I am afraid I shall never learn about money," she answered, shaking her head. "But I wish to," she added, after a thought. "I do not wish to make you so much trouble. I do not wish to be so stupid, either!" with increasing emphasis, and a faint touch of spirit, — a ghostly thing, like her merriment. Nordhall liked better to see her sad, and even her languor had the comfort of gen-

uineness. She subsided into this quickly enough, stooping to pat her dog with an idle and abstracted hand. The dog sat at her feet while they talked, and watched her closely.

"They are registered bonds," began Nordhall again. "I had them registered, you remember, at your wish; we thought it safer."

She did not remember in the least, but she assented idly.

"I regard it as always best to register when possible, — for women and all cautious investors," he proceeded; "though there are disadvantages. You cannot sell so quickly, in emergencies."

"But I do not wish to sell."

"Not now, — no. You might. It is well to remember these things, in case you should at any time prefer to manage them for yourself."

She looked up; her lips parted tremulously, but she only said that she had never thought about such matters, and that she thanked him for his great kindness to her.

"It will be necessary for you to indorse all these coupons," said Nordhall, spreading the bonds upon the table. "The coupons are registered also. It is one of the thoroughly protected things. There are a good many. I 'm sorry. The bonds

run to '85. You will please to write your name here."

He went to bring the ink and pens from Madam Strong's old ebony desk that stood in the adjoining library; but Reliance followed him. The dog followed her. She stood at the high desk to write. Her black dress and the black wood deepened the gloom of the dull room, ranged with law-books and encyclopædias. There was only one window in the room. The sound of the surf came up. Nordhall watched her. The dog watched him.

"Now, come away," he said, and hurried her out.

"I never can forget" — she spoke with a shiver — "that Father Strong died in that room. John never could. You know it was John who went in — late — and found him" — She stopped. It was the first time she had mentioned her husband's name that day. But Nordhall only said, —

"Come nearer to the fire. You are cold."

He stirred the coals, and drew up the easiest of the stiff, old-fashioned chairs. She sank down, and put her hands out drearily, to warm them. They were purple, and had grown so thin that her wedding-ring hung to the joint. Nordhall

looked at them. His own were warm, and the rich blood ran abounding beneath his somewhat delicate and fair color. He had the sensitive complexion that flushes and pales easily. His hair had been red when he was a little boy. He had a boy's eyes yet.

"I will go now," he said, after a difficult pause.

"So soon?" She raised her head languidly. As she did so, she glanced at the clock on the mantel, and both saw that it was twenty-five minutes of five o'clock. It was at twenty-five minutes of five that he had come into her parlor on Mt. Vernon Street, a year ago.

She turned to him piteously; held up her hands, drew them down, and buried her face in them.

He said in a whisper, "Poor girl!" and then he went away. No one could help her. Glancing back, he saw her gently push the dog one side. Nordhall called the creature out, and stopped in the hall and looked at him with a singular sense of fellowship.

"We 're neither of us wanted, Kaiser," he said. After a moment's hesitation, the animal responded to this expression of sympathy, and graciously followed the man out. The weather had thickened densely. Nordhall could see as far as the syringa bushes by the gate, but the road was blotted.

"Which way shall we go, Kaiser?" he murmured, looking over. Kaiser regarded him inquiringly. But it was with the dignity of possession that the setter turned and went back to the house. He waited on the granite steps some time, unnoticed but calm. At last Nordhall, strolling in the fog, stricken by an uncertainty of purpose of which he could not rid himself, saw the door opened and the dog admitted.

It was herself. She seemed to apologize to Kaiser for her neglect. She had infinite tenderness. Like a forbidden dream, he saw her broken face, and then the door was shut.

III.

"We are born loyal." — EMERSON.

RELIANCE did not knit for the Dorcas babies. She did not like to knit. And when blue socks are the final cause of existence, as in the case of Madam Strong, it seems an impertinence to interpose a rivalry under the family roof; as if, for instance, one should crochet them, and of pink, and so seem either to reflect upon the taste, or to undervalue by competition the self-sacrifice of one's mother-in-law.

But it has been well said that when the one creature whom the heart loves is removed, it takes the whole world to fill the place of that one. In the third year of her widowhood, Reliance Strong looked over the syringa bushes, one day, into the street, and remembered that there was a world beyond the gate which led between horse-chestnuts and elm-trees, past the hollyhocks, up the granite steps, into the old white mansion, where two women mourned their dead.

This was the way in which she happened to think of it.

That morning, as she came down in her veiled hat, to walk towards the marshes for a breath of air, she found one of the servants sobbing in the vestibule. It was Janet, the parlor-maid. She was washing the side-lights of the old hall door; her tears mingled with the soap-suds as she splashed and scoured. The keen sun peered through the diamond-shaped glass upon her pale hair and reddened eyes, and her pretty, round figure, with neat apron-front crossed over the grief that wrung her blue calico bosom. Mrs. Strong, feeling as if she and the sun were both intruders, stopped hesitatingly, and asked what was the matter.

Janet answered evasively that it was nothing much.

"I should be glad to help you with your trouble, if I could," replied Mrs. Strong, with some timidity. She had never thought much about the grief of servants; or if, indeed, they had any. In her own brief, happy life as a householder, her people below-stairs had all been in good spirits; or if not, her own had been too fine to notice it. Once, she remembered, the cook

had a tooth-ache, and the quail was burned. And she had given the house-maid things to cut over for a little sister. But with the consummate self-absorption of joy, she had supposed that every woman who lived in the house with Mr. Strong must, in a general way, be happy.

But Janet, between the dripping side-lights, stood crying.

"It 's my father," she said.

"Is he dead, Janet?"

"Ma'am — no; he 's worse than dead."

Reliance had asked the question with a weary sadness, which reacted into a dull sense of surprise at Janet's business-like reply. The lady had heard people talk about griefs worse than death. It had not occurred to her for a long time that there could be such. With a sense of positive intellectual curiosity, she sat down and drew Janet's story gently from her. It seemed, indeed, that a drunken husband might be worse than a dead one. And Janet had twelve brothers and sisters. And her mother hurt her right arm last week. And the baby was uncommonly sick. It was usually sick; but now, Janet said, it was "weak'nin'." And "he" — by whom Janet meant to designate her father — "he" was just "up for thirty days."

"Up?" asked Mrs. Strong.

"Taken up," Janet said. "In the house."

Mrs. Strong thought it must be very hard having him sick, too, and confined to the house at the same time with the rest.

"Ma'am," said Janet, "I meant the House of Correction."

There was a pause.

"He was arrested," began Janet again. "He broke a man's jaw, and he like to broke my mother's arm. He did n't mean to, but he was flyin' round that tempestuous with the rollin'-pin, — our rollin'-pin *is* rather heavy. But *she* won't complain on him. Father's tried to reform, — that 's what they call it when you stop drinkin'. But he says if he had friends to help him, like some folks do, he 'd hold out. But he gets discouraged. He says *his* friends are all poor. And there ain't one the neighbors has *twelve* children."

"Do you think, Janet," asked her mistress, after a thoughtful silence, and still with the same timidity of manner, "that your mother would mind — if I should call to see her?"

"Oh, no, ma'am; she 's glad to see anybody," answered Janet, with the indifference of her type and a little, perhaps, of her grief.

Janet's mother lived over the marshes, and the wind being live that morning, Reliance walked quickly on her unusual errand. The fine air spurred her on like the approval of a friend.

She had to search and inquire for the place she wanted, — the houses on the marshes looking very much alike to her, and so many of their masters being "up," — and, for the first time upon her lonely morning walks, she threw back from her face her long crape veil.

Thus it happened that Reliance was introduced in one of the most effective, because one of the most natural ways in the world, to the griefs of other people; and those forms of neighborhood benevolence which have been the solace of widowed and idle women from generation to generation, gradually attracting, ended by engrossing her sad attention.

A certain change touched her, which Nordhall watched with gratified scrutiny.

"I cannot work in societies and clubs and sisterhoods and such places," she said to him one day; "I quarrel with the other women. I tried it after the fire, when so many of those poor shop-girls were burned out. I was a committee for something, — I forget what. One of the ladies

said a hard thing about the poor girls, and I answered her; and so I hurt their feelings, and so I left."

"What was it?" asked Nordhall, smiling.

"Oh, not much; only she said if those girls would do wrong, why, let them go and do it! She did n't think it was a lady's duty to consider any but worthy cases. If there 's a word in the dictionary I hate, it is that 'cases'! And the girls in such peril, being left homeless all at once!"

"And you told her?"

"I told her I thought if I were a poor girl, left alone, and nobody cared for me, and I were burned out of home and work, and I saw a bright-looking dance-house, and it was warm, and I was cold, I thought very likely I should go in," said Reliance, quietly. "So after that," she added, "I thought I would n't try to work in societies. Then I 'd rather people did not know everything I do. I like to put shoes on a barefoot child without telling of it."

"You have been busy lately?" he asked her, hesitating.

"Have I?" she reflected. "Yes; very, I believe. I had n't thought much about it. Only I

do not like to see people suffer, if I can help it. That is all." She sighed.

"You have" — he checked himself. He thought he would not tell her that he saw a change in her. It was an indefinite thing, — a delicate irradiation of the eye, a firmer settling of the lip, a keener accent in a quicker voice; yet these slight tokens were only like the alterations of color on a bay's surface when the whole day is gray. Nordhall regarded her fine and unhopeful face a moment, and said no more.

Presently he asked her how "Mr. Janet" was getting along.

So then she laughed.

"You always call that poor girl's father Mr. Janet! His name is Griggs. He is doing finely. I 've looked after him a little. He only needed friends. I saw him every day for a while."

"You 're setting a premium on drunkenness!" murmured Nordhall, impulsively. He had never spoken to her just like that; and as soon as he had done so, he hoped she would not notice it. Indeed, it seemed that she did not. She was leaning back in her chair, musing. Her thoughts were already far away from him. She was sitting by the long, low, open window, for it was summer,

and the strong salt air drove into the drawing-room. She had tied a white lace handkerchief at her throat, over her warm and heavy widow's weeds. Outside, Madam Strong was tending the hollyhocks: these were of gold and rose and silver; one was a rare brown or wine-color; it was taller than the rest, and nodded in the wind. Kaiser was in the garden, too; sunning himself at the feet of the gardener, who weeded industriously. Brisk and cheerful sounds came up; the lonely old home had mellowed with the genial season. Madam Strong wore her garden gloves, and a Chinese silk bonnet adorned her head: this was a concession to the Creator, which always filled her household with a certain responsive laxity of emotion; it seemed phenomenal that anybody could do anything which would induce so stately and benevolent a lady to forget the Dorcas babies, and dig at the roots of hollyhocks in unbecoming if expensive nankin. Even Kaiser rolled on her dress when she put on that sun-bonnet, and she said, "Kaiser, Kaiser!" with a dignified but tolerant bend.

"It is midsummer," said Nordhall, looking idly out over the head of Reliance. Her crown of brown hair drooped so near him that it seemed he

felt rather than saw the wind stir it; the full, bright braid seemed to breathe. So idle was his mood that he was startled when she started murmuring, —

> "*It is midsummer, and the hay is down!*"

But then, by a sensitive chance, he too remembered: —

> "*It is midsummer, — all the hay is down.*
> *Close to her bosom press I dying eyes,*
> *Praying, God shield thee till we meet in Paradise!*"

Neither spoke. Nordhall was sorry for her. But he thought bitterly how subtle were the memories of the mourning, and how hard it was for human tenderness to wend its way among them. She seemed to him like those gorgeous and mystical sea creatures that float upon the surface of tropic waters, throbbing with nerves that stretch and strike at every colliding object; but woe to the swimmer who dares cross the purple current where they pulsate! Their lightest filaments, touching, shall cause him an exquisite agony.

Who could help her? Who know where the pulse beat, when the nerve would quiver? She had a world of unknown sensations. He could not enter it; he never had.

Presently she raised her head, and saw him

watching her. She surprised him. She had never seen him look like that. For out of his eyes there sprang a fugitive look that bade defiance to his grave and guarded face. It was a feeling set free; and it was the feeling that only a man knows, and knows only for a woman, and only for her when she is pure and fair and is denied him. But it was a feeling of which the man is no more intelligently aware than he is of the look.

If we wished to be metaphysical, we might call it sub-conscious.

Reliance was used to the calm glances of this good man; to his kindliness and friendliness and care, to the sad affection by which he protected her.

Had it been any other than he, she would have said that *this* was the face of one who admired her, not because she was John's wife, his friend's wife, but because she was a woman and herself.

She put the thought to herself in these simple words. She remembered, with bewilderment like that of a transmigrated soul recalling its last stage of existence, other times when other looks of other men had wrought in her the same recoil and inquiry. She was too fair a woman not to be experienced in reading the countenances of men. As

it was, the young widow pondered, saying to her disturbed heart, —

"*But it is only Charley Nordhall!*" Yes, it was only Charley Nordhall, himself now, her dead husband's friend, gravely regarding her, quietly asking, —

"Won't you walk about the garden? It is too pleasant to stay in-doors."

He brought her hat, which hung in the hall, — he was quite at home at Madam Strong's. Reliance put it on in silence. She followed him meekly. She felt perplexed and not unashamed, as if she had assumed or presumed what no woman would who did not overvalue herself. Her shocked feeling gave way.

This was Charley Nordhall: helping her in a fatherly manner out among the flowers, asking her questions about all her poor people, and stopping to assure Madam Strong that the facts she had heard about the homœopathic doctor were quite correct.

They walked down under the horse-chestnuts, and spoke of the beauty of the elms. They stood together by the gate. Nordhall talked a while about Mr. Janet. Reliance remembered how rich and ready was his interest in all her little ways

of passing life. For philanthropy was not as yet a passion with Reliance; she visited poor people because she felt it to be her duty, and she was glad to do her duty. She liked to talk about them, but had not reached the point at which she could talk of nothing else. She chatted calmly.

Nordhall watched the development of her feeling for Mr. Janet and his neighbors carefully, as he would have watched the growth of other or more intense emotions.

"And yet," he thought, "it grows upon her." He felt a vague envy.

They stood among the bushes which arched over the front gate, and looked across the garden. Bees upon the blossoms made a faint din in the vivid air. The gardener sang at his work. Madam Strong had removed her gloves, and was resting from her labors on the grape-vine settle under the elm that had been pierced by lightning, but had grown the greener ever since. Kaiser came half-way down the path as if to meet them, changed his mind, and lay down lazily, yawning ineffectually at the flies, with his head upon his white forepaws. The hollyhocks blazed in the sun, — rose and gold and silver white, and the brown one taller than the rest.

"That one is like a *baton*," said Reliance, looking about with a little cheerful smile. "It beats time for all the others. Look! It is like seeing music that you cannot hear. It *is* a pleasant day!"

Nordhall was glad to hear her speak like this. His eyes and heart ached to see her there in her black dress, in the color and the light, among the bees and blossoms. All his soul rose and befriended her. He tried to think if there were anything he could do to make her happy that he had forgotten; anything John would have wished him to do, — *did* wish, perhaps, if he were there that moment. He wanted to do what John would like. Then she, looking up, recognized by an intuition the loyalty and unselfishness of his unspoken mood. Without knowing why, Reliance felt happier just then than she had all day. She felt safe. It seemed as if in almost any grave shadow of the blossom-burdened lawn she might look, and she should find John.

When her mother-in-law sent the gardener out to urge Mr. Nordhall to dine, she pressed the invitation herself. The gardener was singing still. He sang: —

"Hearken, my heart, and wonder
What thought in the leaf may be!
Go ask of the bud, and ponder
What message it brings to thee.

"Hearken, my heart, and greet her,
Loth and late, loth and late, though she be!
How shall my soul go to meet her,
Who never will hasten to me?"

"What are you singing, Jacobs?" asked Nordhall, abruptly.

Jacobs said it was a song he heard a lady sing once, — a lady where he worked. She had a powerful fine voice, and she practiced at the pianner a good deal. He caught it weeding petunias. It always made him think of it to see a petunia.

"*Petunias!* Let us say a morning-glory."

"*Sir?*" asked Jacobs.

But Reliance was walking on before, in her black straw hat, stopping to speak to Janet, who had come out to meet her. Janet looked at her affectionately while she talked.

Nordhall glanced about him with a calm delight. He felt at home. It all seemed like a scene in a cheerful German novel, where the people were so much in gardens. He thought of Goethe's ladies, Lotte and Friederike. When Kaiser heard the dinner-bell and they all went

in, it seemed as if they had been doing this every day just so, and would go in again to-morrow and to-morrow, past the pink and white and yellow hollyhocks, and the tall one with the wine-red heart.

IV.

"A friend to give peace to the affections and support the judgment."

"GOING to *Europe?*"

Reliance said this with a crescendo accent of surprise. She lived in a circle of people with whom going to Europe was no more a noteworthy matter than going to Boston. Everybody went abroad, at unexpected crises and for inconceivable reasons; that was a matter of course; and they all came home again quite as soon as one looked for them, constantly exposing one to keen social dangers in respect to forgetting which neighbor spent what season in Naples, and therefore omitting to call.

But when Charles Nordhall said that he was going to Paris in December, Mrs. Strong found herself unprepared for the event.

There are a few of the maturer relations of life upon which no warning can teach us not to impose with the serenity of a child upon parental

loyalty. (When I say "us" I mean the mass of us. I am not speaking of the exceptional, either in nature or experience.) One of these relations is that between a man and woman, each free and both without thought of love or marriage.

It had never occurred to Reliance Strong that Charley Nordhall could go to Europe, — now. Had she questioned herself why this was, she would have been unable to give a distinct reply. Life at best was a mist to the poor girl. She crawled a little way in it, inch by inch, like a person lost in a fog upon a cliff-side. John was dead. She had thought at first that she herself should die. This, it seemed, one could not do.

Nordhall understood this. He was kind. Not that the sound of a sympathetic voice beside the parlor fire, or the look of grave eyes regarding her movements in the garden, created an object in life; they did not even make life tolerable, but only grief more endurable.

Reliance was not ungrateful. Nordhall spared her much business concern, and brought some definite contribution to her comfort. With something of the self-assumption of the invalid or the mourner, she thought this, on the whole, rather natural. That a man should not stay at home

from abroad for the purpose of calling once or twice a week on a woman who irrevocably loved and inconsolably mourned another man, never occurred to her. There was something simple and sincere in this selfishness, after all. She had not the vain or diseased imagination which would have viewed the position in that slant light. Her thoughts were direct as midday. That she *did* irrevocably love and inconsolably mourn was a fact assured as gravitation. Charley Nordhall would not offer to the widow of his friend the insult of intermixing a sentiment with his regard.

And yet, it seemed, he could go away and leave her.

It did occur to Reliance, after some thought, that the one fact accounted for the other. Hence, she added with more gravity and less agitation,—

"Yes, of course. Why should you not?"

Nordhall went. He went in December, as he had purposed. The snow was whirling about the house when he came to say good-by. She shook hands with him cheerfully, lifting her sweet face. He wondered if she would miss him; but neither spoke of missing or of loss. They chatted quietly. Nordhall had business advice for her, to which she listened with submissive attention. He spoke

of his return in April, of his engagements in Paris, of a trip he planned through Italy. Then he asked for Kaiser, and why he was not there to say good-by. He could not talk of herself. He knew not how to assume either that she would suffer from his absence, or, on the other hand, that she was quite indifferent to it. The last supposition seemed a brutal one; but the first he dared not offer. He felt impatiently the undefined nature of their relation. To be the comforter of your dead friend's widow seemed to him, rather bitterly just then, the most thankless position in the world. He wished, honestly enough, that John were there to do his own consoling. Nothing in his heart would have been reluctant towards such a miracle. He was conscious of no wish other than to see her happy.

They made a matter-of-fact enough parting of it, and neither was aware of embarrassment till the final moment came. Then Reliance held out her hand, and looked at him earnestly with her honest eyes, and said, —

"I hope you will have the best voyage that ever was! I hope you will be well and happy all the time!"

She could not easily have said less. But Nord-

hall could not have borne more. He looked at her, standing so lonely there in the long drawing-room; he did not speak. No woman could have forgotten such a look. Reliance felt herself enveloped in it, as she went dreamily up-stairs to tell her mother that Mr. Nordhall's carriage stood at the door. She did not come down again. Madam Strong made her stately adieux in the hall below. Their voices came up. Reliance stood at the hall window and looked out into the storm. She thought, —

"How John would miss him! He used to, — every time."

By and by, when the sound of his carriage wheels had died into the white silence, she turned wearily from the window. She did not think: "I shall miss him, too." But she felt that the house was quiet; that the street was dull; that winter was cheerless; that life was long; that John was dead. Then she went down-stairs and sat with her mother-in-law, who was rounding the blue toes of the twenty-first pair of baby socks whose creation Reliance had watched that autumn. They talked of the weather, of Mr. Nordhall, of the Cunard Line, of the church bazar, of The Heart of Mid-Lothian. Madam Strong

read The Heart of Mid-Lothian once a year; in December, always. She considered Scott a great writer; she was apt to say so about the second week in December.

On this afternoon she talked longer than usual. Reliance assented as usual; perhaps more languidly. Madam Strong, in her dignified way, which was at once above a suspicious and below a compelling scrutiny, watched Reliance that day. Nature had not gifted Mrs. Winthrop L. Strong with that perfume of character which we call imagination; but of experience of life, which is the next thing to it in practical effect and often mistaken for it, she had her share. She was an old woman, and she had seen the world. She laid down her baby socks, and said, —

"We shall miss Mr. Nordhall, my dear."

"Yes; oh, yes," assented Reliance, vaguely.

"You have seen a good deal of him; he has been very kind to you," proceeded John Strong's mother, counting blue stitches on those consecrated wooden needles, which lent such an air of sanctity to the lightest occasion honored by them.

"He has always been kind," replied John Strong's widow earnestly. "John used to de-

pend upon him long ago, when there was anything to be done for me and he could n't do it himself. Charley Nordhall is a loyal friend."

"Has it never struck you," — began the elder lady; but paused, oppressed by an unusual embarrassment.

"What 'm?" Reliance looked at her with clear, sweet, sad eyes.

"Has it never struck you that — Mr. Nordhall would be happier if he were to marry?" proceeded the mother-in-law. Now this was not what she had meant to say, at all. She felt a certain well-bred sense of guilt at her slight subterfuge. Madam Strong was not accustomed to allow herself flights of conversation (or of anything else) in which she could not easily see her way back to her nest of silence and blue single zephyr. She seemed to herself, for a moment, like the plotting elderly woman in the lower class of fiction, which she never permitted herself to read, and of which she was sure Scott would not have approved. A faint color tinged her face, refined and expressionless as old white china. But Reliance answered, —

"Yes 'm. I used to think of it very often; I have hoped he would; but lately I have been so

absorbed in my own troubles, I don't know that it had occurred to me, mother, whether Mr. Nordhall were married or not. I don't know whether he would be happiest so. I had not thought. Men are the best judges for themselves about such matters."

She spoke with a gravity and directness which were not to be mistaken. This young creature, standing there in her black dress, with her eyes dreaming on the fire, belonged to those women for the classification of whom the fine old Bible phrase might have been purposely inspired: she was "a widow indeed."

Madam Strong perceived this, one hardly knows how. She had known young women who, though abundantly tempted, never encouraged a second conjugal affection. Her thoughts occupied themselves with such well-finished sentences. It was natural that John Strong's wife should be one of these women. Madam Strong set up the stitches for her twenty-second pair, with industrious content.

But Reliance put on her things, and went out to walk in the brave snow-storm. She said she must look up Kaiser, and he would go with her. They would walk towards the shore.

And so the afternoon came to an end. Reliance had a relief that it was over. Without feeling any undue sentimentalism in such matters, she hated partings and leave-takings; they jarred on nerves already worn sensitive by real grief. And Charley Nordhall had been very kind.

"He 's gone, Kaiser," she said, with a slight sadness. Kaiser whined, and leaped upon her, barking. She had drawn off her fur glove to pat him, and the dog kissed her hand. She felt grateful for this mark of affection. It was a lonely storm. She felt like saying, "Thank you, Kaiser."

When they came to the shore, she paced up and down. Kaiser followed her with grave regularity. The beach was slippery and glittered; it was a cold, ashen color, and the rocks had the look of iron. But the sea was a curdled, cruel blue. As she stood looking between the foaming lips of the nearest breaker, thence off into the tumult of the snow that brought the horizon so solemnly near to the eye, she suddenly thought that this was the sea which in a few hours would dash between herself and her husband's friend. It seemed just then very wide, wider than if the curtain of the snow-flakes had

been less close and dense. No distance appears so deep as that which is hidden from sight.

Reliance spent a busy winter; this, the third since her bereavement, was perhaps the busiest of her life. One need not be saying much, to be sure, in saying that, for the lives of women like this young creature are not often burdened with care. Mrs. Strong, however, did occupy herself in earnest. Nordhall occasionally wrote to ask "how her parishioners got on," but she gave him no very detailed answers. She did not write often. Indeed, she found, or she gave herself, little time for desultory correspondence. She had plunged heavily into the Poor Relief work of the town. Even in Salem it is possible to care for the suffering with enthusiasm, individuality, and independence. Reliance was not capable of working without. The discovery that a young lady as ignorant as herself of the woes of her fellow-men (and up to this point as indifferent to them) could make a sober man out of a drunkard, or a self-respecting citizen of a beggar, or a virtuous woman of a castaway, awed her; and was, at the outset, almost more of a pain than a pleasure. When she found what

a light sacrifice arouses the large loyalty of the poor, and what a profuse expenditure of feeling they return for a little outlay, she became at first puzzled, then humbled, then grateful, hopeful, comforted. She trod the shores of a new world. She began to know the dangers and the delights of personal ministry to those who need. That subtlest, and I say without hesitation strongest, of human passions, service to humanity, always ready to seek a nature made pliable and fertile by sorrow, attacked hers. She trembled before it, for she did not understand it nor herself. She only knew that now she could bear to live.

Reliance, in short, gave herself up to the people who seemed to need her the most, and the inevitable consequence followed: her need of them became the predominant fact in her life.

She yielded herself to these grave delights,—an evening school her highest dissipation, a temperance society her wildest pleasure, a mission prayer-meeting her keenest comfort; and "times followed one another," and one day she looked, and the syringa leaves were budding, and Madam Strong was sending the nankin sun-bonnet out to be pressed over, and the snow had melted from the flower-beds, and Kaiser was daily very muddy

when he kissed her, and Jacobs was digging about the roots of things, and Janet was singing in the back yard with bare, bright head, and spring had come.

She remembered that with the spring would come Charles Nordhall. One does not forget such things because there are drunkards or poor women in the world.

She thought of this event with less excitement than she expended on the movements of Janet's father, or of a little shoe-shop girl she cared about, who had fallen into gay company. The heart holds one passion at a time; it may be love, ambition, friendship, revenge, or benevolence; but among passions, as among people, one must govern.

Reliance noticed, indeed, that April had passed, and Nordhall had not come; that May was going, but still he stayed; that it was June, and yet he lingered. She thought of this with quiet interest. Had business detained him? Was he, perhaps, not well? Or he traveled for pleasure. And what was she to do about that Iowa mortgage where the interest had failed?

One day, she sat alone with Kaiser on the grape-vine settle under the lightning-pierced tree.

It was but a short half hour after an early tea. She had a book in her hand, but was not reading. Her face and figure indicated expectancy. She looked vivid and eager in the slant light. She wore a fine, white camel's-hair shawl; one end of it was brought up across her hair and fastened there, in the pretty fashion by which women protect the head and shoulders with a single garment, on summer evenings. The dog leaned with chin and forepaws familiarly across her foot. She was looking in the direction of the gate.

It clicked while she sat there, and the bushes thrilled and swayed. A man fastened the latch, and stood a moment in the arbor before he advanced.

She put down her book and came towards him, holding out her hand. But when they met, she stopped short. Kaiser had bounded out.

"Charley Nordhall! Mr. Nordhall! I thought"—

"You thought I was somebody else. That is plain enough." He stood eagerly looking down.

"Why—I—thought you were a drunkard!"

"A man might wish he had been. There, there, Kaiser! There! Yes, good fellow. It is Mr. Janet, then?"

"Oh, yes. Don't make fun of him, poor man! He broke his pledge last week, — the first time," she added earnestly. "It must happen once in a while. But of course it was a great disappointment. I have to look after him for a little while very carefully. I asked him to call and see me this evening. Janet thought he would come. You see they have to be held up, — held up from day to day. Somebody must care enough to do it!"

She spoke with intense, almost feverish earnestness.

"Somebody must care enough — for most of us — to hold us up, each in our different ways," said Nordhall, gravely. "It ought to make us all patient with one another."

They were walking together towards the house, as if he too had been calling every few days, like the drunkards, as if he too had never put the seas between himself and her sweet compassion and daily thought. He drew her aside to the seat she had left, and picked up the book that had fallen to the grass.

"Mother will be glad" — began Reliance, coming to herself, and flushing slightly.

"I will see your mother presently. Let me

stay here a minute. What have you been reading?" He looked at the pamphlet; then laid it down without remark. It was Octavia Hill's Report of Coöperative Visitation among the London Poor.

"You did not come home when we expected," began Reliance again. Her heart smote her,—she had been so anxious about her drunkard. She was afraid she had not met Nordhall just as she should. She had given him the wrong man's welcome, and had been too confused to set it right.

"No; I was detained," said Nordhall. "At least," he added frankly, "I detained myself. I wanted to travel. I 've taken a run through Switzerland. I needed it. I should have written you, perhaps, but I had no reason to suppose you would care especially when I came. I left all the orders at the Bradburne Bank about every thing that I thought you could need before I returned."

This hurt her, and only her vivid cheeks, half the color of anger, half of shame, made answer to him.

He did not or would not see, and persistently drummed away at the same note, with what may

be called the madness or the inspiration of his sex.

"I have been gone two months longer than I expected to. I confess I was selfish enough to hope you would have cared."

"You could stay away two unnecessary months, it seems!" flashed Reliance. She had forgotten about Mr. Janet just then. Was there a touch of pique in her voice? An expression which only another man could have read correctly crossed Charles Nordhall's face. He looked down at her. She looked young and human, like any other beautiful woman. She seemed very near. He remembered how near she had looked, shut in towards him by the lace curtain, on that day in Boston. But that was long, oh, long ago. Impetuous words of joy at seeing her after their separation sprang to his lips. A masculine sense of power and defiance overtook him. Why should not a man make a woman glad to see him?

"You missed me!" he began. "You missed me" — At this moment the gate clicked once more and the syringa bushes trembled shyly. A tall, stooped, weak figure shuffled up the garden walk. A man with gaunt eyes and fine face written heavily with lines of shame stood hesitating

there. Nordhall rose. The two men looked at the lady.

"There is your drunkard," said Nordhall below his breath. He wondered if she would leave him, on this first evening, for that castaway.

"I am sorry," said Reliance, "but *he* needs me. Go to mother. I will come as soon as I can."

She drew her white drapery about her, and stepping hastily across the now darkening lawn, held out her hand to Mr. Janet.

She looked to Nordhall, left alone, less woman now than ghost. The distance between them seemed, in the uncertain twilight, to be greater than it was.

V.

"He takes us all as if we were his blood relations." (His poor neighbors of Walter Scott's friendships.)

SOMETHING touched and startled him as he stood there, thinking bitterly how he had looked forward to this evening and what had come of it. The touch came from the dog. Kaiser lifted and thrust his nose affectionately into Nordhall's hand. Then Nordhall discovered that he had shut his hand rather hard, and that the dog was prying his fingers apart, licking them with that profound obtuseness to the fact that his methods of caress may not be as agreeable as he personally considers them, which is peculiar to his race; though I am not sure but a similar misapprehension is shared by most lower natures as regards their expressions of attachment to a higher.

"Kisses enough!" repeated Nordhall, idly. He had caught the phrase, somehow, from her. She used to discourage Kaiser's advances in that way, once in a while. The idle words struck him oddly

as he said them aloud, for he felt grateful to Kaiser for staying there with him. There were not so many people in the world to kiss him when he came home from Europe, that he need criticise a dog's welcome. Nordhall had no sisters, and his parents were dead. He had some cousins in Boston, — he was going to see them to-morrow; but they shook hands with him.

Reliance had walked on towards the house with poor Mr. Janet. Nordhall and Kaiser went in, after a little while, to find Madam Strong. They passed Reliance and her drunkard, sitting on the piazza in the light from the parlor windows. The lady looked up, and smiled abstractedly. She was talking earnestly. Tears were in her eyes. The man was saying: —

"I promise you before God! But I promised you before. I never thought I'd break a promise to a lady" —

Madam Strong sat within, not far from the open windows, in the soft, June air. Her blue knitting-work lay across Peveril of the Peak upon the table. Her hands were folded. She was sleeping the peaceful sleep of age which never knew a feverish, perplexed, or rebellious youth. What subtle moral problems had ever tortured her? . . . .

She woke with her fragile smile, expressing no surprise at the young man's presence; she was too old to be surprised. She only said, —

"Ah, Mr. Nordhall!" And they fell to talking of the weather and the Cunard Line, the Tyrol and the Roman fever, the doctor, the minister, the Rollinstalls, homœopathy, and the church bazar, as if he had never been away at all. But the young man was in no mood for the generous art of conversing with an old lady, and after waiting some time in vain for Reliance to come in, he bade her mother-in-law good-night, and somewhat suddenly left the house. As he did so, he met Reliance. She was coming up the piazza steps, down which she had gone to say her last earnest word to the man. Nordhall knew how she did such things, — intense in her humanity as in her love or grief. Despite his vexation, he felt a thrill of pride in her single-heartedness. "You thorough woman!" he said to himself as he looked at her.

The thorough woman put up both hands to him. Her face was flushed with a beautiful pity. The struggle for the conquest of a soul — the finest fever that the heart knows — still lingered in her eyes. Nordhall could see instantly how

this fever had gained upon her since he went away.

"I have treated you badly," she said, like a penitent child, "but how could I help it? Come back, please."

He yielded, and they sat down together on the piazza. The perfumed darkness was around them; and the broken lights from the parlor windows served only to reveal their outlines to one another. Her white shawl had fallen, and she held it across her arms; it dropped over her lap to the floor. She wore white now, too, at her throat and wrists.

"I think he can be saved," began Reliance again, eagerly, "but it requires constant watching. I *undertook* it, Mr. Nordhall. How could I bear it if I failed in my part of this hard work? How should I feel if such a poor fellow slipped back into the mud because I got impatient or tired of it all? It is easy to get impatient. It is not easy to save a soul!" She spoke in a low, awed voice.

Nordhall made no reply. He sat and looked at her. Suddenly he broke out, —

"There are different kinds of souls in the world! This is an Irishman's!"

"You mistake," said Reliance, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Janet is an English girl. Mother won't have Irish servants. Mr. Griggs was a coachman in London once."

"*X* equaling the value of a coachman's soul," began Nordhall, passionately, — "a gentleman's, for instance, — an old friend's" — He stopped and said, "Forgive me, Mrs. Strong!"

Reliance made no answer. He hurried on: —

"I took a brutal way of expressing a natural pang. I had been away a good while. A lonely man like me has not so many welcomes to look forward to that he can bear the loss of one very graciously. I beg your pardon. I am glad you are saving drunkards. It is womanly, Christian work. You are doing it like a woman and a Christian. But it has changed you." He stopped abruptly.

"Changed me?"

"You have taken philanthropy as a passion," proceeded Nordhall, still laboring under unusual excitement. "Or, you are a woman, — yes, it has taken you. A woman does not live without emotion. You have found it in saving castaways. You needed excitement. You have it in compelling the better natures of abandoned people. You

lacked occupation. Charity provides you with one. You perished for love" —

Reliance raised her beautiful head. He could see the haughty motion. It seemed to spur him headlong on.

"You perished for love, I say! We all do, in our measures. You had received — and given — more than one woman's share. When you were left without it, — when your trouble came, — you needed a substitute for happiness. Be patient with me! We all do, in different forms. Some of us find it in study, or in trade, some in pleasure, some in sin. I have known people who could take it out in horseback-riding or household-art decoration, in a cigar or an embroidered stork. You have found it in benevolence."

"You are severe," interrupted Reliance gently. "And yet — I have tried — I meant to be unselfish." Her head had fallen, her lip trembled.

"You starved for love," persisted he. "And you have it — there." He pointed down the dark road, where the drunkard's departing steps had ceased to echo. "You have it here," waving his hand towards the hall, where, across the great lighted space left by the open door, the figure of Janet passed, flitting and anxious. "You have it

everywhere you go. You treat poor people as if they were human — and you too. That is the highest bid that can be made for their affection. They give it. You are overwhelmed with it. You needed love. You have found it in its most alluring and its most illusive form. You have too much of it!"

Reliance sat perfectly still. Had she opposed any resistance to this torrent of words, it is uncertain how long it might have gone on.

"You have too much, — it will spoil you! It intoxicates you; you are living on it as that fellow lives on his dram!" Suddenly his manner changed. "And yet your motives *are* so pure, you are so unselfish, that you do not resent all this! And I am a brute!" He got up, and restlessly paced the piazza. "Reliance, — Mrs. Strong, — be patient with me. I am all out of sorts tonight. I have been rude."

"I 'm only afraid you may be right," she answered, gently still. "And yet — if it were — if I *did* need love, and if my poor people gave it — I never thought of it so. But should I be so very much to blame? Must I stop working because I love them?"

"God forbid!" said Nordhall quickly. "Only

save a corner for some of us poor devils who are not drunkards nor outcasts. We mean well. We do as well as we can to deserve your interest."

She had risen, drawing her white shawl up, and stood regarding him perplexedly. That old fancy of his about her, came upon him, seeing her so absorbed and sweet and calm, — white against the dark.

"Wraith or woman?" he said, half aloud.

"What did you say?"

"I said I hoped you had a heart left for your friends."

"I hope so," said Reliance, earnestly. "And for you, — for John's friend — Mr. Nordhall, I *was* glad to see you come home. Did you not know?"

"Yes, I am John's friend," said Charley Nordhall more quickly, after a long pause. "Let us come into the house. The air is damp for you."

He walked home that night with restless, reckless steps. He was thoroughly ill at ease. He knew he had been rough with her, the gentlest woman that ever breathed! He knew that he could not expect her to understand him. What was more immediately to the purpose, he perceived that he did not understand himself. He did not know, till he saw her, how he had looked

forward to coming back to her. He had been a conscientious traveler, with an occupied mind. His dead friend's wife had found her place in it, of course. Had he purposely prolonged his journey, the better to define that place and keep her in it? Had he, not without design, increased the distance between them, the better to observe its effect on herself when they should meet? And now — was he jealous of her interest in her housemaid's drunken father? . . . . Poor girl!

Despite his masculine reluctance to see a woman whom he idealized brought into contact with all the unnamed perils to which earnest work among the ignorant and erring must expose a lady, he was perfectly conscious that she moved on a plane to which he had never aspired, and that her preoccupations were as much nobler as her nature was finer than his own. He acknowledged this fact to himself with stern severity. He acknowledged, too, that any movement of soul which he should make towards that level would spring not so much from a wish to approach it, as to approach her. After some moments' hard walking and clear thinking, he acknowledged that his ill-nature sprung from an unwillingness to lose the position of comforter-in-chief to this attractive mourner.

At this point his thoughts came to a dead-lock. Love? He shrank. Alone there in the dark road, this knightly gentleman recoiled from himself, because he had admitted so much as the word to his throbbing thoughts. With love and marriage those thoughts had nothing to do. He had been a busy man. The full years had left him no time for empty dreams. He had never wished nor expected to marry.

Even if he had, this woman was his friend's wife. He thanked Heaven that he was not born a scoundrel, to love another man's wife.

True, John was what we call dead. Who knew what that meant? Nordhall lifted his face to the sky. All the stars were out.

He looked up solemnly, in one of those pauses of soul which come seldom to hurried lives. What was it to be dead? Old Bible words came to him, brokenly and confused, as he walked along with stumbling feet and skyward gaze: "*To live again?*"

That was her way of thinking. She was a devout and trustful woman, — Heaven help her! Where would she have been were she not? *She* believed that John was a live man.

He expressed this to himself in just these

words; drew his breath; passed his hand over his forehead with the wearied and appealing motion into which reserved people fall only when they are unobserved.

He stretched his hands a little, both of them, towards the sky. He knew he was alone. The street was still. Far in the distance the lights of the town pulsated passionately; each meant a human home. Behind him the unseen sea broke steadily and strong. He stopped, and spoke aloud: —

"John! *John*, old fellow!"

He took off his hat and held it a moment. Then he bowed his bared head.

"It seems as if — if ever a man would make himself known to another, it might be at some such time and place too — as this. Perhaps he would. Perhaps he can't . . . *John!* . . . *Are you alive?*"

He hesitated, standing still uncovered.

"John Strong! *You trust me, don't you?*"

A busy man, not often given to forays of imagination, is the more subject to them when they attack him; and Nordhall was so possessed by his exalted mood that he was bewildered and startled

on suddenly perceiving that he was not alone upon the dark road.

A man stood in the middle of it, perfectly silent, directly in the path.

Nordhall's hand instinctively sought the revolver which he sometimes carried on these lonely walks; but he found that he had left it at home. That aristocratic town had her full share of social extremes, and the Salem rough has acquired a more than local reputation.

As Nordhall tried to pass, with such fearless indifference as the case required, the fellow laid a heavy hand upon his arm.

"Stand off!" cried Nordhall, with a mighty shove. The man staggered and fell back. He made no effort to resume hostilities, but stood still. He carried a little dark-lantern with him, which now turned upon his figure. Nordhall recognized him at once. It was Mr. Janet.

"How did you suppose I was going to know you?" cried the gentleman, by way of apology. "Come, now! What is it? I 'm in a hurry, and no man likes being caught upon a dark road in this way. You might have got arrested for a highwayman. Have you been drinking — so soon?"

Nordhall's natural irritation was slow in subsiding, and he poured the words out in his quick-blooded fashion.

"*No!*" thundered the "reformed man," drawing himself up. "I ain't so low as that, — fresh from a sight of" —

"Never mind!" cried Nordhall. He could not bring himself to bear hearing her name uttered in this way.

"You 're not the man I took you for," said the other sullenly, moving away.

This aroused Nordhall's curiosity, and that subdued his temper. He followed Mr. Janet, — spoke more gently.

"What do you mean by that? Perhaps we don't either of us know what kind of man the other is. Do me the justice to remember that you came upon me like a robber."

"I 'm no robber," said the man, "and no rascal. I 'm a reformed man."

"Why don't you stay reformed, then?" asked Nordhall, bluntly.

"That 's what I was trying to do, when you come up. I thought mebbe you 'd help me. I took you for a different sort of a man, — seein' you in *her* company. I took it for granted a

feller *she* took to would be like herself, — God bless her! It seems I was mistaken, sir."

"Try me and see," said Nordhall, mildly accepting the rebuke. "Tell me what you thought I could do for you."

Mr. Janet hesitated, standing for some moments twirling his dark-lantern round and round between his fingers. The revolving light flashing and fading on his rough face had a sad effect, like the struggles and failures of purpose which beset a shipwrecked life. His forehead was carved with the deep furrows which usually belong to men battling with the alcoholic passion.

"Sir," he said at last, in a changed voice, "do you see that light yonder ahead of us, — just to the corner where Cranby's Cut strikes down to the Ma'shes? I can't get by that light. No, you don't understand, I see; you ain't used to us. *She 'd* understand. She 'd ha' come with me herself ef it was fit for a lady. I can't get by alone. That 's Cranby's Hell."

"Cranby's — Hell?"

"Cranby's grogg'ry, sir. It 's where I 've ben used to get my liquor. I 'm owin' him. I darsen't go by. They 'll coax me in. I've got the money to pay, and he knows it. He won't

let me by. And I darsen't go in, — I darsen't go in! Sir, I 've set here half an hour, on this rock, looking at that there light. I thought mebbe you 'd let me — seein' you was a friend of hers — let me walk by with you, sir. That was all. But it don't matter. I won't trouble you, sir."

He turned drearily, swinging his lantern, from sheer nervousness, in a ghastly way, setting his face towards Cranby's Hell.

"I will go with you," said Nordhall. "Come into Cranby's and pay your debt. I 'll stand by you till you 're out again. Will that do?"

"Then I 'll be clear of him!" said Mr. Janet, joyously. "Yes, sir, thank you. That will do."

The two men walked on together in silence. Neither knew how to address the other, under these circumstances. Suddenly Mr. Janet drew his breath hard and shook from head to foot. They had not quite reached the door of the groggery, but Nordhall perceived that the fumes from it struck their faces. He felt a surprised sympathy with the effect of this fact upon his companion, but he did not comment upon it. They passed in, still in silence, and Mr. Janet paid his bill. Nordhall stood beside him.

The shop was full. The entrance or reception

room in which they stood was fitted up as a little — a very little — grocery; adjoining it was a second smaller apartment, in and out of which a few men skulked on mysterious errands; a third and still smaller room opened beyond, dimly lighted, and with an ugly look.

Nordhall was conscious that his presence in this place attracted attention, and occupied himself with a desire to hasten the business which brought him there.

A few idle words passed between Mr. Janet and the proprietor, who made no effort to detain him. They turned, and were about to leave, when out of the third and inner room a man advanced towards them. His face and figure, even, seemed to smoulder, as he staggered up. The whole creature looked lurid. He was evidently far gone with the insensate rage which forms a stage of intoxication in certain lower natures, and which seizes the first convenient object on which to vent itself, as fire seizes fuel.

"Griggs!" he cried. "*You* goin' ter leave us? By Blank! you shan't! We want your blanked company!"

"You cannot have it to-night," said Nordhall, in his quiet, cultivated voice. "Come, Mr.

Griggs." He put his white hand upon the other's shoulder.

At the instant, through the flare and fumes of the sickening place, he was aware that riot arose; that a raving figure leaped at him; that others leaped at it; that there were cries and a blow. Then he fell, crashing, and knew no more.

VI.

"Friends, lovers that might have been." — BROWNING.

THE process of undermining the reef of Hell Gate had lasted seven years; five minutes tore its heart out.

In Madam Strong's gray old stately guest-chamber, Nordhall, one day, made aloud this mysterious and somewhat cheerless reflection.

Young Mrs. Strong had just entered and left the room. Her errand was corn-starch pudding.

Two weeks had gone since Mr. Janet, terrified and trembling, drove slowly up Mrs. Strong's avenue (he did not know where else to go) at midnight, with Nordhall's senseless body in Cranby's suave, anxious, and hospitable wagon.

No man is more urbane than the rum-seller who is so unfortunate as to have met with a fight upon his premises. Mr. Cranby had sent for a physician, — the most expensive one he could think of. He had himself accompanied the sad procession. He stood at Madam Strong's great, reputable door

with his hat in his hand. When the lights flashed, and the locks leaped, and a woman lithe and stern as an angel of rebuke, sprang, with loose hair, down the dim, wide staircase, he sadly bowed, and urged, —

"Madam, I do assure you, such accidents take place anywhere; it might have happened in a church!"

But her eyes turned upon him like swords of flame.

"Such things," she said, "happen only in hell!"

Nordhall was unconscious for thirty-six hours. In falling he had broken his left arm, but that was a slight matter. The blow upon the head was the source of anxiety. He recovered very slowly. The two ladies attended him with conscientious care. Naturally, the brunt of the labor fell upon the younger Mrs. Strong. She installed Mr. Griggs as assistant nurse. Nordhall's cousins came from Boston, and shook hands with him. All the proper things were done. Yet when was there ever an invalid man — a lovely woman being under the same roof-tree — who was not left largely to the ministrations of the lovely woman? To plan otherwise is plainly a

defiance of Providence which forestalls its own defeat. Some women yearn over a sick man like a mother over a wounded child. Reliance was one of these women. Nordhall's life was in danger. It is probable that she saved it. Her consciousness that he had risked it while helping (however reluctantly) to protect her pet drunkard and to further her heart's work, of course gave a certain personal intensity to the brooding maternal care which she would have expended upon anybody thrown in this way against her mercy. She felt a little as if she had killed him. She devoted herself to his need. She could not do enough.

Inevitably, their relation to one another slightly altered its character, under these conditions. Reliance felt that she had never half known Charley Nordhall. Nordhall felt that he had never known himself.

He used to watch her, as she moved about the room. He found this an absorbing occupation.

"She do move like a field of grain against the wind," said Mr. Griggs, one day. Nordhall did not rebuke this remark; it was reverently made; he felt differently about the "reformed man," now. "She is such a — lady!" said Mr. Griggs. "I never had a — lady — kind to me before."

"So that 's what 's the matter with you," said Nordhall, dreamily regarding the ex-drunkard.

"Sir?"

"It is the strangeness of it, is it, that helps you? The — refinement; the elevation; the inclination from such a height to such a" — He stopped.

"It is her being such a — lady," repeated Mr. Griggs, perplexedly, but with a touch of doggedness, "and me being such a — raskill. Those are the two points in my mind, sir. And she *cares* whether I get drunk. She really does, Mr. Nordhall. It 's give me an idea" —

"Go on," said Nordhall, with an invalid's idle interest in his nurse's chatter.

"It 's give me an idea of the way God makes out to care, — being God, too, to the same time. I can't express what 's in my mind, sir. I can *think*, but I don't know how to *ex*press. You 're getting on fast, Mr. Nordhall. You won't need me after this week, I take it."

Thus they got quickly, as men are prone to do, away from the bare nerves.

Mr. Griggs went, and convalescence came. Nordhall crept about the room, or tottered to the balcony, or crawled to the head of the stairs and

looked down. Reliance redoubled her gentle attentions, now that he was thrown entirely upon the mercy of her mother and herself.

He watched her, as I say, passing in and out. She was apt to wear white shawls. She had a voice created for a sick-room: very low and sweet, but pulsating with a certain cheerfulness, like muffled silver bells. He knew her voice in every cadence of misery, and — long ago — some of her tones in joy. This was a new note, this sister of charity in her sweet breath.

Sometimes she read to him; sometimes they talked; sometimes they sat upon the balcony in the summer air. Kaiser came and sat beside her. Nordhall looked over the railing to watch the hollyhocks come gently to their blossoming, — the rose, the gold, the silver; it seemed to him that he could, by leaning over, touch the tall one with the heart of wine.

Naturally, Mrs. Strong's mission work suffered a slight eclipse at this time. He could see that this troubled her, but that she was too hospitable to desire him to remember it. Delicately regarding her wish, he seemed to forget that she had any other duties in life than to read him Paracelsus, or to bring him pudding. Once in a while

it occurred to him that she seemed to forget, too. Then he would remember that she remembered.

He suffered vague phases of feeling; he drifted on the current of returning life.

Once they had passed an unusually pleasant day. Nordhall got down to lunch. She helped him. Kaiser cried with delight, and conducted him to his chair. Madam Strong was in uncommon spirits. Janet and Jacobs said, "Glad to see you down, sir!" Mr. Janet came over, and shook his hand as if it had been a village pump recently frozen up. The day was superb. After lunch, Madam Strong finished Peveril of the Peak, and went to sleep. They stayed in the cool, shaded parlor. Nordhall lay on the sofa. Reliance played old songs with the soft pedal. He stayed downstairs till after tea. Twilight came on quietly. She glided in and out. Once she sat down, and they talked together a long time. He could not have told what they talked about, — little things; yet he felt as if she took almost as much comfort from it as himself. He turned presently, and looked at her through the growing dark.

She needed comfort. . . . .

Her hand lay relaxed and empty, white against her black dress.

"I wish I were one of the people who know how to say Thank you," said Nordhall, abruptly. He had never before alluded to what she had done for him. He laid his hand upon hers, as he spoke, moved to one of the slight liberties which the well allow to the sick or the sick receive from the well; yet gravely, as one does to emphasize an earnest word.

"Don't, please!" said Reliance.

He hesitated for an instant.

"Don't — what?"

"It hurts me to be thanked, almost always."

"Very well, then."

"I am so glad — to help — any one! What have I to live for, but to help people?"

"'People' must express an obligation now and then," rather bitterly.

"Mr. Nordhall, don't let us quarrel. It has been such a pleasant day!"

He removed his hand in silence. Plainly, she had not noticed the slight and reverent touch. He was glad she thought it had been a pleasant day. He lay for a little, quite silent: for he felt weak, just then, with comfort. She began to talk, gently still. He listened idly. Then she went across the half-lighted room, and groping for

the keys played a little more. Then she came back, and sat silent for a time, again.

By and by she said she must get the air, and would call her mother. As she stood in the bright door-way, she looked over her shoulder and said good-night. She did not return. Janet lighted the lamps. Madam Strong came in, and kindly volunteered to read the Transcript aloud. She dwelt upon the stock list as being of especial interest to a business man.

Kaiser went to sleep on the rug, and snored with unnecessary energy.

Nordhall heard the great front door open and shut, and felt rather than saw that Reliance drifted by the window, with the thick camel's-hair shawl over her head; he was glad she had thought to protect herself. He wondered what she was doing out alone there in the silent garden, among the moonlit flowers. He wondered, What was she thinking? His lips trembled with a senseless, groundless, blind, and battling happiness.

Reliance, in the garden, walked to and fro; quietly at first, like one who feels the eyes of others still upon her, and does what is expected of her. The moon was high. The heavens were

bare. Shadows from the horse-chestnuts fell heavily across the graveled walks, and alternated sharply with jets of white light, like smoke and fire. The wind was warm but restless, rising from the south. The air was heavy with the scent of garden flowers. There were some tall yellow lilies that grew at that time of year. Her husband had a fancy for them, and had first pointed them out to her. They were of a pale flame color, pure and soft; they yielded perfume at night. These flowers stood in the moonlight, in rows, like lamps.

The street was still. The house, too, looked asleep. The garden stretched out like an unreal world. She herself seemed to herself a ghost in it. She glided up and down the defined, dry walks.

Beyond the marshes she could hear the throb to which, of all created sounds, her sense and soul were most responsive, — the regular pulse of unseen breakers upon unseen shores. She listened for a while to the sea.

She went presently and broke one of the yellow lilies from its stem, bent over it, and caressed the spotless, burning thing. The light of the lily and the light of the moon both struggled on

her face. As she stood looking into the flower's heart, she said, to it — to herself — to who knew whom? —

"It would have been an insult — to have noticed — so slight" —

She lifted the hand with the lily in it to her eyes; suddenly she drew in her breath, and began to run. She swept across the white walks once or twice, then plunged into the grass, and ran up and down there, like a creature who had received a wound. The grass was long and wet; it clung to her damp dress and tangled her way; but still she ran, — aimlessly at first, then with a slower motion and more weakly. She came to a stop against an old fence at the bottom of the garden. Fire-flies were there, leaping from the meadows. Except for the now nearer call of the sea, it was cruelly still. She stretched her arms above her head, and cried out, — broken words, she did not know what. The fire-flies flashed about her, as she stood with the flame-colored lily held aloft. By their illusive light, suddenly turning, she looked for a moment at her own hand. She smote it with the other, as if she would have smitten it off.

She went back into the house, presently. Ja-

cobs had been there and helped Nordhall up to bed. Her mother was locking the parlor windows. Only Kaiser noticed her; he came up and smelt of the crushed, yellow flower she held. No one spoke to her. She got up-stairs, — the hall was dark. But the light of the lily was on her.

Nordhall woke the next day with that stir at the heart which recalls a happiness whose nature is so evanescent that one does not know whether it is an experience or an expectation.

The dawn had been dewy, and the day was fresh. Wet branches swept in at his opened windows. There were half-tamed robins on the balcony, twittering and stirring about; one was singing. Jacobs was at work with an unseen scythe in an unseen shadow, and the breath of new-mown hay came up. The sick man felt strong, and would rise and surprise her. He sat at the window in the gray damask arm-chair, resting, after he was dressed. He looked out over the garden, where the flowers glowed, and drank the morning with his boyish eyes. All the fevers of life seemed laid. The world was real and young; no ghosts in it to-day; ghosts did not walk, thank Heaven, by the July sun. A man might have

moments, in a long life (and a guarded one), when no one could blame him if he were too happy to think about dead people.

He crept down softly, clinging to the banister for the support his well soul could not yield his feeble body yet. He would go into the parlor and wait for her. She would come in and look. . . . .

She was already there. She stood with her back towards him. She seemed to be searching for something; she ran her finger over the tufted sofa, and stooped, groping on the carpet with slender, sliding hand. Then she turned and looked out of the window. She did not see him, and he too stood still. She wore a white morning-gown; the high profile of her hair was towards him, and the upper curve of the cheek.

We all know that maddening turn of a woman's head. Ah, what a woman she was!—all woman, all woman; no ghost to-day.

Nordhall stirred, and stepped into the parlor. He only said good-morning, yet it seemed to him that he said half that was in his heart. He only held out his hand, yet it seemed to him that he held out his life to her.

She would come half-way, perhaps; she too

needed comradeship and comforting; she would turn and smile —

She turned, but she did not smile; or, if so, faintly as a disordered dream. She bade him good-morning quietly, said she was glad to see him down — she did not expect — she supposed — And then she faltered, and seemed to remember that he still stood, and that he was weak and trembled. Her manner changed. She led him quickly to the sofa, and softly said, —

"You have done too much. I will bring you a cup of coffee this moment. Do not stir till you get it."

This was all; yet it seemed to him that she said an inhuman thing. She was kind, — oh, as kind as love; yet it seemed to him that she had been cruel as the grave.

When she returned with the coffee, he saw that she had not slept, and that she had been weeping. He did not try to speak. His brain whirled, and he grew faint. He drank the coffee feverishly, and closed his eyes. All he felt now was that he did not understand her. He said he would take his breakfast there alone, if it were not too much trouble; and so she left him without a word. He lay and listened to the robin on the balcony, who sang on rapturously.

Madam Strong chiefly attended to Nordhall's wants that day. Reliance passed in and out, but wandered often into the garden, and sat for hours in her own room. Madam Strong did not comment on the circumstance. She read the Advertiser, and expatiated on Dr. Bishop's success with Mr. Nordhall's case. She had the utmost confidence in Dr. Bishop. She believed him to be the superior of many more celebrated men. He had always treated the best people in Salem. Nordhall listened confusedly,

Towards night she came into the parlor, and drawing her blue yarn from the old-fashioned black-silk bag that she wore at her side, began composedly to knit and say, —

"Reliance has been out of sorts to-day."

Nordhall pinned his eyes to the black-silk bag; it was run on clasps of black ivory that extended on either side, like gymnasium poles; the blue yarn seemed to be vaulting over these poles, as if competing for an athletic prize.

"She met with an affliction yesterday," pursued Madam Strong, in her finished, exasperating manner. "She lost her wedding-ring."

"*Ah!*"

"Yes, poor girl! She felt it very keenly. She

has just found it. She dropped in the garden last evening, while walking there to get the air before retiring. She has cried herself sick. She has been at the church-yard — where my son lies — half the day. Her hand has grown so thin, I have often urged her to get a guard. I am quite relieved that it was not lost."

The old black-silk bag shut with a soft snap, and the blue gymnast quivered, impaled upon the ivory pole, from which it seemed to have no longer courage or power to get away. Nordhall watched the senseless thing with interest, wondering how it was either going to get on and be knitted into anything, or climb back in the bag and be shut up.

VII.

"You may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flower of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart but a true friend." — BACON.

NORDHALL concluded that it was time for him to get well; and he proceeded to this end with great intentness. In less than a week from the day Reliance broke and bruised the golden lily, she had her flowers to herself. She walked much in the garden in the evenings of that waning moon, alone and calm. She searched no longer for lost rings, but wisely did as her mother bade her, and bought a guard.

The day that Nordhall left the house, she put on her bonnet and went to a temperance society, a business women's reading room, and a mission prayer-meeting.

The next day she called on five "reformed men" and three sick girls, and attended a conference of coöperative visitors.

Reliance Strong was in no sense a remarkable

person. Unless to love loyally is to be distinguished, she had no claim to the unusual. She was like many other delicate and tender women whom you and I know, and her life was like so many other women's lives that I hesitated at the outset to tell her story, and I hesitate more and more as I go on. It is my reassurance that no one will read it through who does not love women, and follow with some degree of comprehension the whirl of the all but invisible hair-springs by which the pulsations of their lives are touched. I am not without comfort sometimes, too, that these hidden wheels stir so fast, given a certain momentum to their secret strength, that such a story as this cannot be very long. The jeweled machinery yields and wears. Then, perhaps, we buy us a new time-piece, or we patch up the old one, or, possibly, we go without any for the rest of our lives. But the struggle to keep golden hours by a weakened mainspring is over, and with it the tale.

Reliance, I say, was not remarkable; yet in one respect I may retract the words. She had acquired by nature or by grace a power far less common among women than with men, — she knew how to withdraw from an indefinite and un-

restful relation. She did not parry and play with a position which she did not clearly relish, nor with a feeling which she did not fully understand.

Something was the matter between her and Charley Nordhall. She would give him a chance to find out what. She plunged into her mission work with greatly increased energy. The slightly neglected shop-girls greeted her back The somewhat overlooked invalids met her with outstretched hands. The patient but a little perplexed "reformed men" took heart, and welcomed her with watchful eyes.

"I know we can't expect you to be always just so," said Mr. Janet, philosophically, "but a man situated as I be is a great deal more so when you are!"

She did not answer this singularly lucid remark; her lip trembled in the fine profile cut against her veil. It was after the meeting, and she stood in the low door of the mission room, with the sunset struggling over her into the close, dusty, and now silent place. Her heart smote her once again; but not this time for Nordhall's sake. She turned and looked about the room. Little Janet, who was "organist," was just closing the asthmatic melodeon. The janitor was gathering up

the battered hymn-books. Mr. Griggs stood, with his hat off, regarding her with his famishing eyes; he was pale with long abstinence and looked feeble. She could feel how every nerve in him cried for the indulgence between which and him her ideal stood. She stood, — *she!*

Her hand was ungloved. (It was the left one, on which her wedding-ring hung fettered by a fine gold chain.) She gave it to Mr. Janet, in one of the silent pledges whose power over the giver is doubled by the fact the recipient cannot understand it. The miserable place seemed sacred to her as she turned away.

She saw little of Nordhall for several weeks. He called, of course; he expressed his gratitude. Madam Strong sat in the room, and the conversation took that feebly unobjectionable and general tone which insures safety, if not entertainment. Reliance talked a good deal about her poor people; a perfectly objective direction of thought, in which his inclination seemed to follow her. Nordhall proposed going to one of the temperance prayer-meetings; but Reliance did not encourage this herculean effort at reformation. Nordhall's bright boy's eyes fell when he perceived this. He sincerely wanted to go; he said he should like to hear Griggs pray.

"Would you, *really?*" she asked, piercingly. He flushed, but made her no answer just then. Afterwards, Madam Strong having stepped out for her camphor bottle, he said very frankly that he was not a fellow to propose *that* sort of thing for the sake of her society. It was her turn to color. She felt that she had misrepresented herself, and stood in an undesirable attitude. They got on badly together that evening, and he went away at half-past eight.

When he had gone she felt ashamed of herself, and as if John would be ashamed of her; and so went miserably up-stairs, took out her husband's picture, and cried over it for a while. It seemed to her that in all her life she had never needed him as she needed him now. *He* would know just what to do about Charley Nordhall.

Some time intervened between this and Nordhall's next appearance. He was very busy; he wrote a note of five lines to say so, and to ask, Had the ladies any commands upon his services in New York? He traveled a little, and attended to neglected duties. The real-estate business acquired a renewed importance in his mind, and its influence upon the interests of the country assumed a directness of which he was not always aware.

He set his teeth over it. He too could work, as well as she. They went their separate ways in that loud silence and with that pursuant consciousness of each other which belong only to ill-adjusted and unsatisfied relations.

One day, Reliance and Kaiser went down to the shore, and walked, as their wont was when she could find time, alone together up and down the beach. Reliance was not happy that day. Her work had gone wrong. One of her men had broken his pledge. One of her girls was "keeping company" with a rascal. One of her sick people had died suddenly, — had sent for her; she was in Boston matching crape for her mother-in-law, and when she came home, tired and dusty, in the evening train, she was too late. Mr. Griggs was out of employment and the coöperative treasury out of funds. Philanthropy seemed to her of less value than life itself just then, and more than this she knew not how to say. She was not very well; had stayed at home with her mother and her poor people during the July fevers, instead of hunting up Myrtle Snowe or some other cool old friend, and going to the mountains, as Nordhall had wished her to do. She was tired. Her whole heart ached.

Then, too, it happened to be one of those frequently recurring, little, unimportant anniversaries, of whose existence none but the mourner knows. This is the day when the dear one brought us a rosebud, gave us a book, sang us a song, took us to drive; or we walked to see a sunset fold, or a foxberry bloom; or there was a poem read, a headache cured; or hands touched, or lips met. And this was the hour, and the years have not buried it; they cannot, nor can we.

Reliance, on the yellow beach, wandered to and fro. The sky was yellow, too, and hence the sea; it was the sunset of a gray day. Dull splendors had broken out of yielding cloud and mist; a glory was on the horizon which was fog an hour ago. Into this glory the slender, dark-robed outline of the solitary figure on the shore could not fuse, — black cannot melt to gold, — but rebelled from her atmosphere, and appealed the more to the eye that watched her, for this reason.

He thought at first he would tell her so, coming upon her suddenly, almost brusquely, as he did. But he told her nothing. She was a little startled at seeing him, and he only strolled by her side a moment or so, in silence. Then he spoke to Kaiser, and then he said — what was

perfectly true — that he did not expect to overtake her; he had come out for a hard walk alone on the hard sand.

"And I too," she said, smiling.

He hesitated. "Shall we pursue the objects which drew us here?"

"I don't know," said Reliance, with gentle vagueness.

"Shall I leave you to your own devices? I can go about my own."

"Just as you like, Mr. Nordhall. I am glad to see you; you know that." She spoke with a grave, sweet dignity. There was never any ingenious parrying of words between these two. No man could have drawn inconceivable conclusions from fantastic glimpses of feeling in her conversation. As for the thousand-and-one refined phases of that modern emotion which used to be called flirtation, but which we have now "evoluted" into a form of psychological study, a man would as soon have made them the staple of a morning call on St. Catherine or Elizabeth Frye as to have offered them to this young and beautiful widow.

"*Are* you glad to see me always?" asked Charles Nordhall, with an honest flush.

"Why, certainly I am!" But this was without any flush at all.

"And glad to-day? I hope you are particularly so to-day! It is a good while since I have seen you; and there are not many such evenings as this in a summer."

They walked on together, drawing nearer to the water, and so nearer to the glory in the heavens, beyond the shifting sea and stable shore.

"Not many such in a life-time, I think," murmured Reliance, after this pause. She was moved by the color, by the sound. The wave broke at her feet gently, but somewhere the breakers cried; the sun was ready to sink into the yielding tide. It seemed to her that they all alike — sun and shore, she and John, sky and molten mist — were part of the splendor, made the glory. And Nordhall, too, — Nordhall was a part of it; she could *see* that he was; she could not see her husband. . . . .

She stirred, and they strolled, splashing their feet in the warm and glittering shallow wave that overtook them. They walked in perfect silence for what seemed a long time. The sun dropped.

"I'm tired!" she said abruptly.

He led her to the nearest rock, and wrapped

her shawl around her. She submitted quietly, — so quietly that he marveled, till, looking at her, he saw that her lip was quivering.

"You are tired out!" he cried.

"I believe I am," she said, trying to smile. "It has been coming on for a long time. Don't mind it!"

He sat down beside her on the great brown bowlder. He knew that she was afraid she should cry; he would not look at her, nor speak. She was one of the women from whom a tender word spoken at the wrong (or the right) moment will bring the scorching tears which a sharp or neglectful one would have frozen stiff. For a silence, he left her to struggle with herself.

When she spoke, which she did soon enough, she was quite under her own control; not at all, he keenly felt, under his, as she might have been had he made her cry. He half repented his delicate and honorable impulse. He did not know how grateful she was to him, nor that such are the little acts which a woman never forgets, and always reveres as if they were a species of heroism. The man capable of them seems to her, for the moment, less unlike herself; the sympathy is stronger to the fancy: he seems like a woman to her; the clay is finer to the touch.

She began to talk directly, when she had recovered herself; of the waning light; of the advancing fog; of a beach of Norton's this reminded her of; and whether Mr. Nordhall thought William Hunt could paint waves?

But Nordhall heard her with rebellious irresponsiveness. He could not so soon abandon that other mood; nay, more, he would not. It had not darkened, but it had deepened, before he turned, and without any preparation, looking down at her through the subdued but still live color of the evening, said, —

"I begin to think I was not honest, once, in a thing I said to you. I wish to confess."

"Oh, I will absolve!" she answered quickly.

He thought, She does not wish to hear me. She fears me; or she fears what I shall say. He answered, —

"I am very much in earnest. Will you permit me to go on?"

"It is plain I could not prevent you if I tried. Yes, go on."

"I said — once — that I valued your friendship for your husband's sake. That was true, so far as it went. It does not go far enough. I desire your friendship for my own sake — now." He paused,

and added slowly, "Perhaps I always did. But I did not know it as well as I know it now. I desire — that we may be friends — you and I — because we are you and I; I wish it for my own sake and for yours. I wish to be quite clear. I know that I have made myself obnoxious to you lately; I hope it was partly that we did not understand one another. I want, above all things, that we should understand each other with perfect distinctness, if we can. I ask your permission that we may be personal friends for the sake of no other than ourselves. Do I make myself plain?"

"I think so," said Reliance, in a low voice. She had sunk back against the bowlder, which now had grown purple, like a royal figure. She wrapped her shawl about her, as if preparing for a conversation of some length. Nordhall took a gray stone at her feet, and leaned on his elbow, looking up. She noticed just then the color of his hair, and wondered if she had never observed it before. She had usually thought about his boyish eyes when she looked at him. Often, poor fellow, she had not thought about him at all.

"I wonder," she asked abruptly, "what you would think it meant, precisely. What *is* a friend?"

"Definitions are always dangerous," murmured Nordhall, inaudibly. Then, raising his voice to a gently argumentative tone, he seemed to put her question aside in that imperious, because easy, way which he had at times. "Now, look here. Here we are. I am a solitary fellow, not so young as I was, — I am thirty-seven. I find I mind it, living in a vacuum, more than I used to do. My mother is dead. I have no sisters. My housekeeper is sixty-one. You know I don't care for society women, and you know I never did. You and John used to make me so happy, in Boston. I remember the first time he asked me home to tea I said, 'Your wife won't want me.' I was afraid of intruding; you don't know how afraid of intruding I was! But you made me so easy, so happy! I remember just how you walked across the room. I remember how you looked when you asked if I ate olives, and if I would have cream. I had only seen you at dinner-parties and such places, before, — among the other women. I remember how you asked me to light the fire, after tea, as if I belonged there. From the time when I saw you in your own house and you were so good to a homeless fellow, and John was so good, — he said, I remember,

when I said you would n't want me, 'Trust my wife'" —

"Oh, don't!" she cried, putting up both hands. "Oh don't, don't, *don't!* I can't bear it! I can*not* bear it! Oh, *what shall I do?*"

She sank; she hid her face against the purple bowlder, — soft as velvet to the eye, hard as iron to the touch, — and on its granite shoulder lay and sobbed as if she would sob her soul out.

He let her cry. He let her cry till she was worn out. All his life and strength struggled to comfort her. But she was John's wife. He left her to the arms of the rock. He only put out his hand in the twilight, and stroked the fringe of her shawl.

By and by, they perceived that it was growing dark; they seemed both to have a recognition of the fact at the same moment, and simultaneously stirred and rose. Neither spoke. She gave him her hand, and he helped her from the purple rock to the gray one, — both black now, — and so upon the lighter, yielding sand. His fingers, as they met hers, touched the chained wedding-ring.

They walked home without one word. She was perfectly quiet now, and leaned wearily to-

wards him. When they had gone through the syringa arbor and up the long front yard, at the foot of the steps she paused, and said, —

"If we are to be better friends, to understand each other better, — and there is no reason why John should mind" —

"There is no such reason!" whispered Nordhall, impetuously. "I ask for nothing but friendship. I want nothing else! I only want that what I have shall be *mine*. John would not blame me for this, — or you either."

"I *could* not do anything for which my husband could blame me!" She drew herself to her full height, and dropped his arm.

Then she said, "I am too tired to talk about it to-night," and like a spirit she was gone.

VIII.

"There sometimes occurs in a strong soul a love firm enough to transform itself into impassioned friendship so as to become a duty, and appropriate the quality of virtue." — CHATEAUBRIAND.

THAT delightful consciousness of having left something of the first importance so far unexplained to a woman as to necessitate an immediate occasion for seeing her again, followed Nordhall the next day, through the (for the time being) depreciated interests of the real estate business, whose value to the country and to posterity seemed less marked than it had of late.

He took an earlier train than usual out from Boston, and sought her at the first pardonable hour. As he walked up the avenue, that night, he looked at the great horse-chestnut shadow meeting over his head, and across the garden where some snow-ball bushes stood white in the night, and towards the gray marshes, and up at the eloquent house, and thought within how small a compass the drama of his feeling for this

woman had been played. How limited the scenery through which she and he had moved in these four widowed years! It made her dearer to him that this was so. He was a quiet fellow, liking quiet ways and near horizons. What should he have done if she had been one of the mourners who want to be taken to the theatre to "be got out of themselves," or who must keep running to Paris for a "change of scene"?

He thought, with a thrill of pride in her, not unlike the haughtiness of possession, how sincere a life it had been, how *real* she was. He thought of her unselfishness, her modesty, the sweet outgoing of her nature to those more needy than herself; how rare, how fine, this bruised but vital womanhood!

Nordhall exulted over her, as he walked up the lonely avenue.

He did not fully analyze the nature that so appealed to and commanded him. Yet he plied himself with queries, keen and inevitable as stabs of physical pain. Whence grew a genuineness real and rich as life? Whence sprang this tenderness, sad and sweet and mysterious as death? Whence came this deepening wealth and beauty of a character to which every year added new splendors,

like a picture before which he stood, distant and awed, to watch the artist lay the wet, fresh colors on, — he who could not touch it?

Some works belong to their creator, like those of the great Belgian painter, who never parted with his own, but elaborated his pictures from year to happy year, until he died and left their glory to his country, perfected and unique.

. . . . Whose picture was *this?* Whose work was *she?* To whom returned the bewildering outline, the tender tint, the fine harmony?

He did not answer his own questions. He did not admit in words that no power on earth could make and keep a woman like this woman but the eternal fertility of constant love. He did not say to himself that the very ideal which he reverenced was the daily growth of causes which separated and must separate it from himself.

He only went up the steps and rang the bell, and asked for her.

Madam Strong was not well that night; she lay on the sofa in the drawing-room, and apologized to Mr. Nordhall, carefully covered with an afghan knit in mourning colors, gray and black. She found a bronchial difficulty in her throat, and talked about Dr. Bishop. Nordhall and Reliance

sat by the table and chatted quietly. Reliance was drawing up a list of tableaux for the entertainment in the coffee rooms. He helped her, and they discussed many little things. If she only said, "*Would* you have a temperance dialogue?" he felt as if she needed him. If he only ruled off her programme, it seemed to him as if he upheld her. She was gentle, cheerful, and calm. They had a pleasant time.

Her scrap-book, among other things that could be assessed as taxable for the temperance entertainment, lay upon the table. He took it up, with the delicately familiar glance which says: I know I may! She did not forbid. He turned the leaves slowly, pleased with her permission; yet, had she refused it, he would have been profoundly hurt.

"Ah!" he said suddenly.

"Ah what?"

"*You* have that thing too! I never heard of anybody else who liked it. It came out in the Pacific, I think, anonymously. Apparently, it fell dead. *I* carried away the remains and buried them; but I thought myself the only mourner."

She held out her hand for the book, with a sparkle of pleased curiosity. She was at the time

assiduously cutting gilt paper for a tableau (name and nature as yet indistinct) in which Janet was to figure. Janet had begged to be allowed to "act in something with stars." Mrs. Strong read and returned the poem, with the air of an astronomer disturbed at an eclipse.

These were the lines: —

Thrust backward on the border of the Land,
Defied, yet dauntless, we obey, and drop
Our level lids, — dazzled. None see so far
As the denied. To none, so radiant, lift
The foreheads of the reigning hills. To whom
So fair, the garments of the valley, when
She leans against their feet?
Not lost, O Land,
The mute, majestic forests where no man
Has set his foot; thy tropic balm and calm
Of tangles where the moon shines warm enough
To call the blush upon the rounding grape.
Not lost the unfamiliar, far, bright sands
Of hidden beaches waking with the wave
That calls the soul to sail a virgin sea.
Gold is the gleam that never fell on trodden shores,
Thy shadows purple splendors be, brave Land!
O perfumes faint, for which we have no name!
Strange blossoms none have ever culled, nor can,
And colors new-created! Glorious!
Ye are not lost, but living. Living, we.
Await us. Ye are ours. Each to his own
Shall come. The sure can wait. We set our seal
Of kingdom and discovery upon

Thy silences and solitudes, and wild
Surprises, and unfathomed rest.

O Friend,
Step hither; look with me. Draw near. Shrink not.
Since we shall share the empire, are we not
So strong that we can share the exile, too?

"It has no title," said Nordhall, feeling that some one should speak. "*I* should call it — if I must call it at all — Discovered, — Unexplored. Who was that wise fellow who said poems ought to have no titles?"

"How many rays would exact science permit in a gilt-paper planet," replied Reliance, thoughtfully, "if it had to cut them with extremely dull embroidery scissors, from a pattern furnished — and adored — by Janet? Yes; I like the poem. I wish you would pick up a few of these nebulæ scattered round the table." Nordhall felt a vague hurt, as if the continuity and intensity of his sentiment had jarred with the variety and delicacy of hers; while at the same time he respected his own impulse sturdily. What if he had quoted poetry at an unexpected moment? At least his mood was as worthy as her recoil from it. He shut the scrap-book, however, and became as devoutly astronomical as she could wish.

When Madam Strong went, by and by, to sleep, — Dr. Bishop having recommended naps, — and the gray and black afghan took on a less insistent character to their consciousness (there was a bereaved work-basket left with crape bows; but this was not so expressive), Nordhall and Reliance quickly fell into one of those silences which are so much more awkward and vocal than speech. She worked over her stars a few minutes, but was the first to speak, and she said, without looking up, snipping burning bits of gold paper over her black dress, —

"I want to understand, exactly, what you meant by saying that it was for my sake."

"That what was for your sake?"

"That we should understand each other better, and be better friends, — for your sake, and mine too. Why mine too?"

"Because I think you need me."

He had never spoken like this to her. She lifted her protesting eyes. He had brought his lips together with a decision which alarmed, but a gentleness which disarmed her.

"You are lonely," he said, with suppressed breath. "You are as lonely as you can be, and live. I desire to help you. I desire to comfort you all I can."

"You always *have* tried to help me."

"Yes, but so imperfectly, so poorly; always with some doubt or misconception behind. I could help you more, far more, if you would let me."

"I have my husband!" She looked over her shoulder, as if he stood there.

"You can't see him!" cried Nordhall, cruelly.

"What does that matter? He is *there*."

Instinctively, Nordhall looked over her shoulder, too, into the warm, lighted, empty air. His eye traversed the bright vacancy, the length of the drawing-room, and returned. His manner changed.

"Perhaps he is. I hope so, if that helps you any. I offer you nothing which I should not offer if he were, — though *I* can't see him either. I am not here as your lover, Reliance Strong. I am here as your friend."

Her face crimsoned terribly, like crimson lightning, for that one instant, then she went deadly pale; and then her calm and natural look came back.

"*Please* don't think I misunderstand! I am not so vain, so conscious. I do not think about things in that way. I don't indeed! I only want

to do what is quite right. If it is right to take the kind of friendship you speak of, to need you, to depend on you, when I am perplexed or tired . . . . Oh, I *am* so tired, lately, it seems to me as if I could not live another day!"

She dropped her paper, as if ashamed of her own impulsive words, and moved from him; went across to the low window, opened it, stood by it, then stepped over and out upon the piazza. He followed her without a moment's hesitation, stopping only to draw the afflicted afghan closer over Madam Strong, who had partially waked and spoken. He closed the window after he had passed through.

This little pause gave Reliance recovery of herself. She stood looking up at him. They seemed to be shut apart there, — they two alone together in the September night. She held up her hands in that appealing way no other woman had, and with her sweet self-possession said, —

"Dear Mr. Nordhall, I am willing to let you be my friend, as well as John's. I think it must be right. I think my husband would feel it to be so. Let us help each other all we can. It is a hard world . . . . to live in. . . . . I need help." . . . .

Her voice dropped. He reverently took both her hands in his, for a solemn instant; then put them down, as if they had been dead desires.

His ideal of himself stood there beside them on the dark veranda; invisible but powerful as the dead man's spirit. It was as if four of them were there, — John and Reliance Strong, Charles Nordhall and Charles Nordhall's vision. At that moment he felt himself to be capable of something unexampled in the history of the feeling that man knows for woman. He felt himself capacious for the last sacrifice and the powerful protection that only he who is wrought of passionate self-control and controlled passion, can render to her whom he might have loved.

Of all the forms and shades of fine relation possible between delicate men and women, none, perhaps, is of a subtler power over character, as none is of a sadder, than this which exists when the free soul and bound lips say, *You whom I might have loved.* None, perhaps, knows either happiness so secret, so unselfish, or fidelity so hopeless and so permanent.

"But I will never love her!" cried the visible to the invisible Nordhall, in the September night. "I will befriend her — for her sake."

IX.

"The friend asks no return but that his friend will religiously accept and wear, and not disgrace, his apotheosis of him."

"Friendship is no respecter of sex." THOREAU.

THEY met next time with instinctive gladness. Neither could explain what both experienced. He overtook her by chance on his own street in Salem. It was in the afternoon; and she was not alone.

She had with her that old school friend of whom mention has been made. She had invited Myrtle Snowe to spend a week with her. The two ladies were about to return some calls. Mrs. Strong had made calls latterly, and had accepted one or two dinner invitations for Myrtle's sake. She no longer wore that cruel crape veil. She looked young and cheerful. She took Myrtle's arm like a girl.

She was stepping from the carriage when he first saw her, with her long skirts clinging back. She put her foot to the ground with a spring. He was too late to offer her a hand.

Miss Snowe was a bland blonde (a very charming one), and Reliance beside her looked deeper and richer in color than usual. As he came up, standing with raised hat, she lifted her brown eyes. They had a timid light. But his brimmed with a radiance which seemed to overflow and encircle her, like an aureola. It was not the radiance of love, but finer, firmer, gentler. He was not dazzled, but he saw all that he could bear. The boyishness of his look, and the always slight reserve of his manner when among people, deepened this expression of freshly discovered and controlled happiness, as if he had a monopoly of all there was in Salem, that day.

It was nothing to stand and be presented to her friend. It was nothing to mention the pleasures of a drive and the personal peculiarities of the weather. It was little to express his gratification that she was able to make calls. It was not much to see her go sweeping up the Rollinstall steps, tall, slender, gracious, and distant, nodding down to him like a lily on a cliff.

And yet it seemed to him that he had been very near her. He passed his hand over his happy eyes as he walked down the street alone, to keep an appointment with a man who was wise in bamboo and India ginger.

He felt as if he must look too happy; as if everybody would see it, and ask why. He met people whom he knew, and greeted them with rare good fellowship; they all were people he liked, or had not lately seen. He noticed bright colors on children, and the costumes of ladies. He observed that the sun had splendid character, and that the sky was of the solemnly happy September tint, — blue fire to its heart's core; not a cloud to be found, high and far and deep as man could look.

It gave him the headache to look. He turned his eyes earthward; he was content with the earth. He had a friend in it. Oh, she *was* his friend! — *his friend.* The God of earth and heaven bless her!

The decorous pavements of Salem bounded beneath his feet that day; he trod on the blazing September air. He hurried to his appointment, and hurried away from it, stricken by the restlessness of his lightly-grounded content (poor fellow), as if itself had been made of air, and must stir and start at the unheard command of unseen powers, and so away with him.

The Bamboo and Ginger man looked after him with iron-gray, experienced eyebrows, keenly

gathered; and to the junior Bamboo and Ginger (who had no eyebrows to speak of, and less experience, whether you spoke of it or not) said, —

"There 's a fellow has made a haul in stocks to-day. I 've heard he plays with Grand Smash and Electricity, — just called at 161⅝. He has the look."

The junior Ginger only answered, "Ah?" Although inexperienced, he had long since learned to agree with people who had eyebrows. He held, however, reserved rights to those private opinions which, it is plain, Providence never intended should be held subject to any superficial personal qualifications; one of these privileges was a stolid conviction that either rheumatism or a woman accounted for everything. He had never heard of Nordhall as a lady's man. It was undoubtedly his "off day" on rheumatism. To-morrow he would be in red flannel by the fire. At least he could have a bamboo chair and ginger tea. Life was not without its marked compensations.

Myrtle Snowe on the Rollinstall steps, gazed critically down the street after the gentleman's retreating figure. She said: —

"Walks too fast. A fine-looking fellow, though. Who is he, Reliance?"

"You surely remember Charley Nordhall, my husband's friend. I thought you knew. He has been very kind since"—

"No," replied Miss Snowe. "*I did not know.*" She looked Reliance straight in the eyes as she spoke.

"And she never flinched," thought Miss Myrtle, while they were sending up their cards.

There were flowers which it was imperative should go to Madam Strong's the next day, for the quiet dinner she gave to Miss Snowe and her most intimate Rollinstall. They went; but they went in the form of a brutal florist's blunder,—all red carnations; and carnations, it is well known, even if of paler complexions, are thought to bespeak economical tendencies. What right-minded man would send the lilies of Paradise to a lady, if they could be had for five cents apiece? Besides, the more he thought of them, the redder they seemed to grow; they must have looked unpardonably red. The least he could do, was to go over and take the tea roses on which they had stolen the march.

He found the ladies just about to go out. The carriage stood at the door. Miss Snowe was promised to be at those musical Rollinstalls, where Rubinstein's songs were sung. Mrs. Strong accompanied her as far as possible, on the way to the mission meeting at Cranby's Cut. Madam Strong remained at home with Kaiser and her bronchitis and the tea roses. Nordhall accepted the ladies' invitation to escort them, without any definite perception of the situation on either side, perhaps; idly, as such things go.

It was a long ride to the Rollinstalls', and Miss Snowe was to be left first. The three chatted lightly.

Reliance had said: —

"Why don't you go with her? We don't sing Rubinstein at Cranby's Cut."

But Nordhall had pleaded his "store clothes" and a refused invitation. They were late, and wafts of music came out as he and Myrtle Snowe stood in the open door. Myrtle had on a long pearl-colored cloak that fell to her feet, with its silk cape drawn over her hair. Reliance, from the carriage, leaning out, watched her lovingly. Her imagination was quickened by this slight renewal of old ties, in the early, selfish absorptions of

widowhood so long held loosely. She looked from Myrtle to Nordhall with a heightened perception of facts which she had almost forgotten. Youth, music, light hours, and natural hopes were in the world. She thought how little he sought them. She wondered if he needed them, — this homeless man. She remembered that his youth was passing.

Gusts of passionate songs poured out from the house. They were singing Der Azra just then: —

"*Welche sterben wenn sie lieben.*"

Nordhall came back and got into the carriage. He was insanely happy to be sitting there beside her. He could not have said why he took pains that she should not feel this. He was very quiet at first. Then he abruptly asked her how old she was.

"Twenty-eight," said Reliance, smiling. "I was twenty-four when I last took 'my evenings out' in that way."

"And you think this is a better way, — this one we are taking?"

"You shall judge for yourself. There *is* a difference in the quality of music, I admit. That translation of Der Azra is atrocious. If I were poetic I would improve it. Can't you?"

"Considering the absorbing nature of my literary occupations, so overrun as one is in State Street with the imaginative element, so studious a life as I am already forced to live! — Mrs. Strong! how thoughtless of you!"

They laughed merrily at their own simple wit. He hummed the melody, leaning back in the dark carriage.

"*Welche sterben wenn sie lieben.*"

"*I* will translate it!" cried Reliance, heroically. "Now listen. You can hear it following us away down this silent road."

She leaned to the carriage window with parted lips.

"Who die with love, and loving die."

Both listened to the dying sound; it died.

"*Who if they dare to love must die!*"

sang Reliance, then, almost inaudibly. "It makes better poetry than song, I know, but never mind! That is my Terrible Song. How people can sing it, in light gloves, with fans, and eat oysters afterwards!" —

Nordhall could not bear that there should be even a terrible song in the world that night. He began to talk of other things, — little, light

things: roses and the sunset; the breakers and the horses; the story he heard on the cars to-day; the last Salem engagement; then of her, and he was glad she made calls and went to dinner now and then. Could her drunkards spare her? The less favored classes of society were to be congratulated on receiving whatever modicum of her philanthropic attention. Doubtless, if she went back to the Rollinstalls' now, some of them might take the pledge — not to take the name of Rubinstein in vain. And so on, and so on.

"Why, you are a tease!" said Reliance, suddenly looking up. She too felt happier than for a long time. Charley Nordhall was greatly changed. He no longer tormented himself and and her. Good-by to moods and miseries and misunderstandings! It was fortunate that they had those disagreeable scenes, now they were well over. It *was* all over. How quiet and natural and pleasant it was! She yielded herself to that drive. She ran her long-gloved hand through the swaying satin rest, and lightly leaned her cheek against it, listening to him. He told a good many stories; he made her laugh; she had a thoroughly good time; she did not know when she had been so merry. He piqued her with that boyish au-

dacity which never forgets itself, nor the reverences and distances withholding it, yet ventures to their edge, delicately enough. He teased her like a brother about all sorts of little things.

They were both laughing heartily when they came to the mission room in Cranby's Cut.

The coachman had "an evening," and Jacobs was driving that night. He turned the impassive face of a well-trained servant upon them as they got out of the carriage. She could not have told why, but Mrs. Strong stopped, hesitated, and gravely spoke to him. She asked if he had seen Janet on the way.

"She 's playin' on the pianner in there, already," said Jacobs, pointing with his whip towards the uncurtained window of the mission room. Jacobs usually knew where Janet was. He looked in eagerly. Janet wore a blue tissue veil crossed over a black straw hat behind, and brought round, and tied under her chin. It was a very becoming veil. The solemn, if consumptive, music sounded under her devout, hard-working fingers. Janet was a good girl.

"Put up the horses somehow, if there *is* a place, and come into the meeting," said Mrs. Strong, kindly.

"There 's a sort of tavern opposite Cranby's," said Jacobs without unbecoming alacrity. "I might drive round and see if they can be kept out of draughts there. It *would* be easier for the hosses."

The lady and Nordhall passed on, and into the Mission. She dropped his arm leisurely in the brightly-lighted little entry. Mr. Griggs came out to welcome them, and one or two of the other men waited for her.

She and Nordhall were late, and "the meeting" had begun. They went in and sat down among the rest.

Nordhall had never been in such a place before. He observed everything with keen interest. He was in a low, small room that had served as counting-room for some mills; it had been bought by what are called "the temperance people," among whom, alien as she was to them by social surroundings, by ecclesiastical connections, by instinctive and acquired tastes, by everything but a highly-cultivated conscience and an independent type of religion, Reliance Strong had found herself at home, and made herself of value. An open fire blazed in the room. Softly shaded lamps stood on a desk over which a red cloth

was thrown. The walls were hung with pictures and Bible mottoes; both selected by a severe taste. He could not complain of them; he thought, if he were a drunkard, and had wandered in, — say, from Cranby's, — he should like the looks of the place. There was a smoking-room attached to the prayer-room, a reading-room, and a bowling-alley; but at this hour no disturbance came from these directions. The prayer-room was two thirds full of men; the rest of the audience were women, — their sisters, wives, and daughters; a few ladies of another sort, — from devout (if not exclusive) circles in Salem, — and Reliance.

Little Janet sat at the "organ." Jacobs came in and found a seat by the door. Mr. Griggs presided on the occasion at the red-covered table, or, in the phrase of the place, "took charge that night." He read a chapter from the Gospel of John, in a clear and modest voice. Then he "gave out" a hymn, which the audience "united in singing." It was evidently a popular thing with them. The men joined in with great heartiness, and Janet's really sweet voice rang above theirs. Mrs. Strong sang, too. Nordhall had never heard the hymn or song before. It had a refrain which pleased him: —

"Rescue the perishing, care for the dying."

Then there was more of it about —

"Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save."
"Rescue the perishing — Rescue the perishing!"

The face of Reliance, while this hymn was being sung, took on a strangely sweet and solemn light. He could see that she had forgotten him. That merry ride seemed a great way off. She had gone beyond reach of her grief, her loss, her loneliness, — even John, perhaps. He remembered something he had once read of Whitefield, that "he forgot everything about the men before him, except their immortality and their misery." So, he thought reverently, it was with her. He bowed his head with a sense of great distance from her when Mr. Griggs "led in prayer." It was some time before he remembered that the man was not praying to her.

He listened but dreamily to the "testimonies" of the "redeemed men," which followed Mr. Griggs's prayer. Nothing jarred upon his sense of reverence; he floated in it, as on a newly-discovered golden tide, in which she seemed, a practiced swimmer, to lead him on. Under it all he felt somewhere that these men were honest, and that this place was holy, and that he was not worthy to be in it.

After the short and earnest service was over, he waited for her, standing awkwardly, a stranger among those plain people. He noticed how pale many of these men were with the rigors of late and arduous self-control. He recognized one or two whom he had seen reeling about the streets of Salem for years, and passed them by like some one else's nightmares. These men wore a singularly intent and abstracted, though quiet, look. He could think of nothing to liken it to but the look of transfiguration. He wondered if they caught it from her, by a sort of reflection. After some thought, he remembered WHO it was, in the old story, that was "transfigured before them;" he remembered that there is no disciple without a master, no reflection without light.

He was still thinking of these things, solemnly enough, when she turned slightly towards him, — she was across the room, — and her look led him like a hand. She only said that it was time to go, and would he speak to Mr. Griggs before they left? And when he had done this, and when the men and women had stood in a little group to let them step by, and when Janet had locked the melodeon, and the hymn-books were put away, and the kerosene lamps screwed

down, and reality settled on the unreal place, they passed on together through the deferent scrutiny of the people, and Jacobs drove them away.

They sat together in the carriage. Some of the men on the steps of the mission room were singing the choruses of the hymns in low voices.

"Rescue the perishing, care for the dying!"

Perhaps the disciples of Rubinstein would have stopped their finely-organized ears before that music. But in the disciple of a Greater than Rubinstein, a higher sensitiveness replaced this lower.

Reliance leaned, listening, and Nordhall leaned and looked.

"They are such dear people!" She spoke first, in a grateful, girlish tone. She was still excited. She was not the least of a saint. She was a very human woman. She did a Christian deed like a woman, not like an angel.

"I suppose," he murmured, finishing aloud his unspoken thought, — "I suppose that is partly why Jesus Christ succeeded. I never thought of it before. If *he* had been an angel, what would a man like Griggs have cared?"

"One of the men — a violent fellow, who draws knives when he is drunk — told me once," she said, "that Jesus Christ was *too high-toned* for him. He was perfectly reverent about it, too."

"Yes," said Nordhall, without smiling, "I can understand that. Well. So this is a specimen of what is meant in the newspapers by the temperance work? I've never thought about it. I supposed it meant speeches and women with spectacles."

"Oh, no, this is no fair specimen!" cried Reliance. "I'm not *in* it."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not part of it. Don't take me for a specimen. I'm only one woman trying to help a few people in her own way. I am timid, inexperienced, uncertain of my own views, and I'm Mrs. Winthrop L. Strong's daughter-in-law. *I* could n't be *it*. Why, there are women all over the land, all over England and Scotland, the hem of whose overdresses I'm not worthy to touch!" She tried to laugh. "There are women banded together, twenty thousand strong in this State alone, and so all over the country, pledged to make the salvation of drunkards and the extermination of the drink-traffic the solemn object of

their whole lives, — women who sacrifice, and hope and bear, and do, and pray, and who don't dare to be alive unless they can 'rescue the perishing.' *They* are the *consecrated.* But I, — I did it, as you said, at the first, because I was lonely. I am not worthy to be named beside these people who have given themselves to an ideal which has" — she hesitated; she did not often speak of herself in this way; did not perhaps think about herself in such long sentences — "which has given *itself* to me," she finished softly, "and has made me so glad, so content! Any woman can do it who will. Most, I think, who cared to do at all, would do more good than I."

"If this sort of work is what you think it, what these women you speak of think it," said Nordhall musingly, "what a future it has! What a book could be written about it, — a great appeal, a prophecy!"

"I have thought of that," she answered quickly. "But the time is not ripe. Some one will do for these poor slaves what Harriet Stowe did for the black ones, I think, — I am sure. And literature will be the richer by another superb moral idea. But not yet, not yet. We are not ready. I doubt if any order of genius could take

the twang of the temperance lecture out of such an effort, now. We have not reached the literary stage. But it will come. If *I* were literary, I could explain to you what I mean and why I think so. But I don't know how. I seem to make it cloudier and cloudier. . . . Never mind! It's only *you!*"

She laughed a trustful, happy laugh. She felt the value of this friend to the full just then.

"If ever I've been disrespectful to your work in that place," said Nordhall, "I beg its pardon and yours, too. I don't doubt I have, for I've never been that kind of a man, you know. Things come in one's way, — subscriptions and causes and what not, of course, — and one tries to do one's share, but *people* I don't deal with. Now I respected what I saw in that counting-room, to-night, with all my soul. If there's any way, ever, that I can help you in this sort of thing, I wish to do it. I wish you to count upon my sympathy."

She thanked him, and said she should be glad to; this was all. Yet it seemed as if she said a great deal. And they did not talk much more till they got back to the Rollinstalls.' The air was frosty, and they could hear the men singing the

hymns for a long distance. Reliance looked at the stars, while she listened. Nordhall looked at her.

Some words of Moore's had got hold of him, and mingled oddly with the singing of the hymns back there upon the Mission steps.

> "Ah! did we take for Heaven above
> But half such pains as we
> Take day and night for woman's love,
> What angels we should be!"

Rubinstein was mute when they reached the house. Myrtle, in the door-way, at the top of the high steps, looked like a lovely, dim Bacchante in a fresco. She floated down and into the silent carriage. It seemed almost as if she had wandered into a church and were out of place. They all began to talk lightly, as if to break an unacknowledged spell. Myrtle (who had a pleasant soprano), hummed reckless and rapturous snatches of song.

> "*Love's own madness, Love's own madness, in your voice!*"

Nordhall would not come in, that night; it was late when they got home. As Reliance put her hand in his, to say good-night, he seemed to uphold her whole soul. She thought that this was

friendship, — to laugh the lighter, to work the harder, to be gladder, to be graver. All her life intensified, as if old chords had been struck with a heavy pedal.

Myrtle Snowe came into her friend's room that night and talked a while; of Rubinstein, of the Rollinstalls, of this and that. Reliance looked at her dreamily. She knew she was not half taking in the meaning of Myrtle's words, yet she seemed unable to help it. She was conscious of being intensely preoccupied with thoughts which needed classification, though she was aware that Myrtle had got into a long, pale blue Watteau wrapper, and looked like a lovely tile. Suddenly sense struck her, and the blue tile throbbed with vivid life.

"Of course, Reliance dear, it's none of their business — but you must know" —

"WHAT?" sharply.

"You must *expect* to be talked about. You must know, of course, that you are reported to be about to marry again — Why, Reliance! Why, Reliance Strong! Don't look like that! Why, what on earth" —

"*How dare they?*" . . . .

She had got rid of Myrtle at last. She had got rid of everybody, and lay sobbing, face down, choking in the pillows of her own bed. It had seemed to her at first too cruel to believe, and she had burst into a cry of lofty and beautiful anger, worthy of Penelope or Arria. Then her good sense (and Myrtle's perfectly irresponsive face turned up to her, as out of place as a Marcus Ward Christmas card at a surgical operation) had quickly recalled her to herself. This was not a matter to be discussed with people who had Myrtle's eyes. Nay, it was not a matter to be discussed with any. The young widow recovered her sweet reserve, and, simply expressing her surprise and sorrow at what her friend told her, and adding that there would be always talk in the world as long as people were born with ears and tongues, had kissed her good-night and locked her out of the room.

Now, suddenly, as she lay there on the bed, the faces of those people at the prayer-meeting came back to her. They stood in rows, and she and Nordhall passed through them. She recalled the deferent scrutiny, the vague sadness, the untranslatable something in their dumb eyes.

They too, — *they too?* . . . .

X.

"Neither is life long enough for friendship. That is a serious and majestic affair." — EMERSON.

MRS. STRONG'S first thought, the next morning, was that she would write a note to Charley Nordhall. She would ask him to come and see her immediately. She would tell him — what? What could she tell him? At least there would be time enough to think that out before he got there. The note could be written, and Jacobs should take it, and so much be secured.

Her mother was less well than usual, and Myrtle was to go home at noon. She found herself occupied with these things, but preoccupied about the note. She stole a few minutes while Myrtle was returning a last call at Amy Rollinstall's, and locked herself into her own room, and wrote rapidly, without hesitation or premeditation. She had that noble and fatal spontaneity by which high-minded (no less than weak-minded) women trust themselves on paper. But all the world might have read these simple lines: —

DEAR MR. NORDHALL: — I want to see you this evening a little while about a matter of importance. Very sincerely yours,

RELIANCE STRONG.

After she had given the note to Jacobs, with instructions to put it into the hands of Mr. Nordhall's housekeeper before the business train was in, she experienced a slight relief from a tension of feeling which had been tighter than she knew how to bear. He would come. It would not be many hours to wait now. Something would be done, something said, invented, to lessen her trouble.

Her prevailing emotion was one of great withdrawal, almost of repulsion, from the man whose existence in the world could cause her what she was now enduring. Yet underneath this, as the calm of the sea lies below its roar, as the hush of the wind hides behind its cry, she was not without a singular sense of trust and rest in him, as if he would or could restore to her the ease of her lost unconsciousness and content. It was as if with one hand she dismissed, and with the other clung to him.

She suffered reactions, in which his image took

on different hues to her; like the object on which the eyelid has just closed, and which strikes the retina first with its immediate, then with its spectral illusion. She saw the real and the complementary colors.

She dwelt upon the conversation which would take place between them; she thought that if he came in just then, she should be able to tell him all that was in her heart. She was impatient for his arrival. She counted the hours till she should hear his familiar ring. No one touched the bell just as he did; she always knew.

Myrtle went away at noon. She kissed Reliance twice more than usual; but she felt more keenly than usual the distance between their natures and their experiences. She did not understand Reliance, did not know what to say to her; did not know what the poor girl was thinking, with that look in her face, yet grieved a little more over their parting for this reason. Her blue eyes filled as she wrung Reliance's cold hand. Myrtle supposed it was because she had never been a widow, that Reliance was not confidential.

When she had gone, Reliance went up-stairs and sat with her mother, who grew no better. Madam Strong seemed feverish, her breath short-

ened, and she asked for Dr. Bishop. An order was sent through Janet to Jacobs, who, as soon as he returned from town, was to go for the doctor. It being long past office hours, it would be late evening — nine or ten, perhaps — before Dr. Bishop could reach a patient the relativity of whose sufferings he could gauge by long experience, and with whose chronic inability to change her medical adviser he was sufficiently acquainted. We all have our pet convictions, of which life never defrauds us, but which rather every test contrives to enrich; Madam Strong's was the assurance that the ministrations of any substitute for Dr. Bishop would have, in her own case, a result of which the least that one could say were that it would be fatal.

This afternoon she was really so ill that Reliance timidly suggested, "We might call in the homœopathist, mother. I saw his carriage turning up the Rayburnes' Avenue. He is a good-natured man; he would come for a temporary prescription, and the doctor would never mind."

"I can die," gasped Madam Strong, pressing her withered hand to her heart, not so much to express fidelity as pleurisy, — "I can die, but I cannot call an irregular practitioner!"

That afternoon Reliance long remembered. It began to rain, and the fog came up from the sea. The wind rose. She read Guy Mannering aloud, and devoted herself to the sufferer. She was not without anxiety, and by no means deficient in tenderness. Yet she was ashamed to find that her mind refused to be a prisoner in the sick-room of her husband's mother. She tried to chain it to the stately bed, to the cannel fire, to the brass-bound bureau, the faded gold-colored damask of the window curtains, the figures on the old English Brussels carpet, the engraved Sistine Madonna over the mantel, the real little Tintoretto above the pier-glass, the blue gymnastic knitting-work in the bag with the black ivory poles, that lay in the partly consoled work-basket, which had "gone into" purple ribbons.

Rebels, rebels, as wild as the rain, as blind as the fog, as fierce as the winds, her thoughts defied her. It was three o'clock. It was half past. It was after four. By seven she might look for him. By eight they should have had their talk. For he would come. He would not mind a storm. What should she say? She was frightened to perceive that she had not yet decided what to say; she should be taken unawares, and so at a

disadvantage. She was ashamed to find herself wondering what effect her mother's illness would have upon this interview with Nordhall. Could she be spared long enough to say what must be said? How unfortunate if she must go down and dismiss him in all this storm, and defer a conversation which seemed to her more and more imperative and difficult! She grew feverish and restless. The storm increased. The fog thickened, and going to the window she heard, or fancied that she heard, the whistle of steamers in distress off Baker's Island Light. It darkened rapidly. Her mother tossed upon the dignified bed. It struck six o'clock.

Reliance left the window, and went and sat beside the bed, and held her mother's hands. She could not think of anything else in the world that she was perfectly sure it was right to do. There was no mistake about this. She stooped in the dark, and kissed the old lady's forehead. Her sudden tears fell on it, and Madam Strong said: —

"Why, my dear daughter! Do not be so anxious about me! I do not regard my indisposition as serious." And then poor Reliance felt like a hypocrite of the first degree, and caught her in her arms, and kissed her again and again, — her

good mother, John's mother, all she had in the world! Her sense of kinship to John's kin seized her like a strong hand. His were hers, and hers were his; she herself was his; and these were facts, and nothing could alter or disturb them. She grew calmer. She felt the eternal life of the marriage tie like a tangible presence in the dark room. She was elevated above her own mood; her worst weakness and her deadliest doubt looked far from her, like mists seen in valleys to a climber. She caressed her mother with unprecedented tenderness.

Yet when the door-bell pealed and throbbed through the house (a more nervous ring than usual) she trembled so that she had to slip off the bed and walk the floor to get her breath. It was seven o'clock. He had come, and she had not prepared one word of that important interview. She must say something, and what it were possible or wise — womanly — best —

"Ma'am, it 's the doctor. Shall he come up without I light the candles?"

Thus Janet, standing peaceful and fair in the door-way, with an old brass candlestick and low candle in her hand. "And Jacobs says, ma'am, he forgot to tell you that Mr. Nordhall" —

"Did he not deliver the note to Mr. Nordhall, as I bade him?"

"But you know you sent him directly for the doctor, ma'am, before ever he was out of his wet things, or the hosses up; and he 's *had* no chance to tell you up to this present opportunity," added Janet, with a touch of feeling, "that the housekeeper bid him say Mr. Nordhall was called away on sudden business, and would not get back for several days. She would keep the note till he returned. Did you say I was to light the doctor up?"

Assuredly. Yes. She was to call Dr. Bishop at once, and light those candles which could not shine in Madam Strong's eyes.

Dr. Bishop was a busy man. Madam Strong was not a dangerously sick patient. Even had she been, I think he would have found time to observe the daughter-in-law who ministered affectionately at the bedside, that night. He belonged to that class of physicians among whom George Eliot ranked her Lydgate, "a man who thought less of a case as a case than as John or Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth." Dr. Bishop summoned Mrs. John Strong below stairs, when he left, and informed her abruptly that he wished her to take her mother to the mountains.

"This is sudden!" said Reliance, changing color.

"She must get away from the sea. I wish you to take her to Bethlehem, New Hampshire."

"When?"

"Next week Monday."

"Will she be able to travel?"

"Perfectly."

"It is October."

"I wish you to spend the month of October there with her. Go to the Sinclair House, and then select a place to suit you. You will inquire into the location of the well, wherever you go. You can have open wood fires, and be made quite comfortable. You will please to make your plans at once. The sooner the better for you."

"You talk as if I were the patient!" cried Reliance, almost angrily.

They were standing in the little library, by the high ebony desk. Reliance leaned upon the desk. Opposite them, across the drawing-room, the long mirror hung. It seemed to regard them. Their figures were reflected in it, — the physician's in part, the lady's in full. When Reliance said, "You talk as if I were the patient!" Dr. Bishop turned and looked over the empty room at the glass. Reliance, in her unornamented, close-fit-

ting black dress, stood there like a sweet and sombre panel. Her cheeks were burning with a high light. She returned the physician's gaze with feverish eyes; she rebelled against it with all her being; yet some traitor in her seemed to spring and call to it for help or health, as if she *had* been ill.

"A patient, — yes, you are; but none of mine."

The image of the physician to the image of the lady said, or seemed to say, this in the mirror's mist.

"Go to Bethlehem with your mother. It is the best thing you can do."

But when Reliance would have spoken, the glass was empty of him. She only saw herself standing in the gold-framed panel, quite alone.

A blight upon these highly-trained, observant faculties, which were the next thing to the clairvoyant, and far more dangerous to the peace of society, inasmuch as they were the more respectable! The business of these people was to cure bodies, not to meddle with souls. The doctor had dared to look at her as if she were a perplexed or hysterical girl. She could have hated him.

Little Janet stood at the head of the stairs when she went up, regarding her with dog-like eyes.

"You seem so tired, Mrs. Strong, dear; let *me* sit with her a while."

Reliance wrung the housemaid's hand in silence; the sympathy came nearer to her than that of what we call "an equal," just then; she could have put her head on Janet's shoulder and cried.

"Kaiser is in your room, asleep on the rug," said Janet, with her quick feminine perception. She knew that nobody comforted her mistress like Kaiser. "I 'd go and see how nice he looks, if I was you. You 'll kind of rest a mite. I 'll give the medicines and look to the flannels till you come."

Mrs. Strong obeyed the girl in silence. She was not ashamed to have *Kaiser* see her cry. The only objection to Kaiser in the capacity of comforter was that he insisted on kissing away the tears. But all forms of created sympathy have their drawbacks. This is a fact intended, as the theologians may have suggested, to produce a dissatisfaction with the lower and craving for the higher types of consolation.

Dr. Bishop had that quality of command which elicits obedience, and the ladies went to the mountains on Monday. Madam Strong was dis-

tinctly convalescent, and feared the nature of the mattresses; but, unquestionably, the doctor understood her constitution. If he prescribed a husk bed on a mountain peak in October for pleurisy, husks and mountains alone could in all human probability save her life. It no more occurred to Madam Strong that Dr. Bishop could be mistaken in an opinion than it occurred to her to question whether the world was made between Monday morning and Saturday night, and finished off in season for the Lord to read the collects at the Sunday morning service. True, there were people, even in Salem, who disagreed with the book of Genesis and employed the homœopathist. Madam Strong was not ignorant. She treated these facts as an educated person should, with well-bred gratitude that Dr. Bishop's patients were better informed. She went to Bethlehem without a murmur.

Reliance, too, went not ungladly. She was tired with everything and everybody. Nordhall would be detained some days longer; he had written about it; it might be even a week or two. There was an oil-well in Pennsylvania on fire, and he had trusteed as well as private interests there. He had written a pleasant little note, which began, "My dear friend."

One would have time to think in Bethlehem. And nobody knew about one; nobody talked. She was not sure that she ever wanted to see Charley Nordhall again. She vibrated with gusts of feeling. She was no longer in a hurry to experience that necessary interview. At times she wished she had never seen him. She did not write to him.

Nordhall returned from Pennsylvania in the course of the week. His oil-well was out. He could have wished his feverish impatience to be at home were as calmly laid. He hurried to his house, intending to take a nap, a dinner, a smoke, perhaps, and after that a long, quick walk. He would be in that physical harmony which insures health of soul before he went to see her. He dreaded himself a little after these separations; he might speak impulsively; he would rather guard himself and her with vigorous repose. He thought it all well over.

There was that admixture of impulse and prudence in Nordhall's nature which has been well called "the true reasonableness of manhood."

A colder or a calmer man would have been, in fact, more liable, in such a position, to be ambushed by his own feeling. Nordhall knew that

he had auburn hair and the eyes that match it, and that he might any day make an outrageous blunder. He was learning to analyze a temperament which is either a man's first friend or deadliest foe. He pleased himself at times with his psychological successes.

He did not glance at his mail till he was dressed; in fact, not till dinner was past, and he went into the library, hesitating over a cigar. Then he looked the letters over idly: two from the Bamboo and Ginger man; one from the Boston cousin; a grocer's bill, the gas, the water; an invitation from Amy Rollinstall; tickets to church charity theatricals; three more invitations; two more October bills. At the bottom of the pile he found her note. It was dated ten days ago. He did not smoke that evening. He read the note three times, put on his hat, and went immediately out. He walked rapidly, and so gained ten minutes, perhaps, on the information which Jacobs and Kaiser had in reserve for him: The ladies were in Bethlehem for the mistress's health, and Janet was with 'em.

"*Which* mistress's health? Who was sick?"

"The old 'un, sir. But Janet thinks Mrs. John is peakèd herself, sir. Janet is that fond of Mrs. John."

There was time; ten minutes saved would carry him into Boston by the last evening train, and he could there take the morning express to Littleton. He thought better of this, however, in season to save himself; went home, to bed, and to sleep on it, like a sensible fellow. In the morning he decided to go about his business. If it still struck him as wise, he would run up to Bethlehem on Friday. *Why* it is a less noteworthy attention to go out of one's way for a woman the last than the first of the week, a wiser than the compiler of these records must explain. Certain it is that one may safely expend on Saturday or Sunday an amount of social emotion which on Monday dangerously defies a social *convenance*, impalpable as air and imperious as iron.

To go to her "on a week-day" was plainly undesirable, under the circumstances. Any man may spend his Sundays in the mountains.

On Friday, Nordhall went to Conway; thence to Littleton, where for no very definite reason he spent the night. On Saturday morning he ran over to Bethlehem and the Sinclair House.

He found their names upon the book; they had left for a private boarding-house, which it was so easy to reach that his impatience re-

acted a little, and he sought delay and thought before he met her. He strolled out into the old parish burying-ground, a pleasant place. The October countenance of the hills looked down at him through veils of passionately colored mist and foliage. The late birds twittered and hopped upon the grave-stones familiarly. Delicate frost was on the blackberry vines and sumach, the wild briar and elder, that burned beneath his feet, or leaned in cloaks of purple, carmine, and olive upon the gray shoulders of the old stone-wall.

He drank in the keen air. The purity of the place and its peace reached him, in some sense. He was glad he came. It seemed to bring him a little nearer to that invisible world so near to which she walked; wherein dwelt the life of those who have departed from the seen to the unseen form, from the measurable to the immeasurable influence upon character. He remembered that it was a world near which he, too, must stand, if he would hope to comrade or to comfort her. He remembered that John Strong was in it.

He took off his hat, and wandered, bareheaded to the October morning, among the old-fashioned and long-quiet dead. He was glad of these few

moments to prepare himself for the sight of this woman whose friendship had become the light of his life. He felt like one who stays to offer silent prayer before a religious service. His thought of her was a cathedral to him.

Something clung to his foot as he strolled among the graves, timidly, almost like a finger-touch.

He stooped, and saw a little flash of color, silver-gray. It was a woman's veil.

At first he thought he would not touch it. He knew as well as if she had told him, that it was hers. He had seen her wear such a one sometimes of late, to protect the eyes which had suffered from so much crape. It seemed to him that he could no more mistake it than he could mistake the texture of her hand. His color came slowly, in great waves. After that momentary hesitation he snatched the veil and hid it in his breast. . . . . And now she was his festival. He was like one who had asked grace before a banquet. He left the dead behind him. (Oh, they sleep well beneath the bright hoar-frost! Little cries of birds upon the head-stones neither stir nor start them. Colors of the October morning, what care have they for ye? Countenances of

the mountains, they return ye no regard!) He left, and leaped the grave-yard wall, and hurried to her.

The boarding-house door was open to the sharp air, and he wandered in. There was a hall or entry-way, with a hair-cloth sofa in it. He sat down here a moment. Long corridors running to closed rooms branched from this entry toward the two wings of the house. As he sat there, a door opened at the extreme end of one of the passages, and she came out. She had a little breakfast tray which she carried, with her slight wrist bent under it, in one hand. There was a window at the end of the corridor, uncurtained; her outline was distinct and fine against this light; her face he could not see.

Her attention was occupied with the tray. She gave that slow turn of her head.

He rose at once, and began to plead with her.

"I've only come to spend Sunday — at the hotel. Don't be angry with me! I just got home, this week."

She did not say much. He took the little tray from her, for he saw the fringe of the orange-colored doyley tremble across the edge of the tea-cup, where it had been folded. She stood hesi-

tating, and then sat down upon the hair-cloth sofa. Her color returned. He feared that he had startled her, and passionately blamed himself. He looked at her. His own lip trembled. Her loveliness had taken him by surprise.

"What do you carry that heavy thing for?" he began, dashing down the first idle current of thought that presented itself as an outlet to what he was feeling; he must find fault with something.

"The landlady is sick," said Reliance, demurely, without looking up. "The table-girl has just left to teach a — university I think they call it; it is somewhere in the direction of Littleton. She was a highly accomplished young woman. *She* would never have upset that cup of cocoa. It is trickling on your hat. She studied Greek after the boarders were abed. I respect the New Hampshire waitress, as a race, exceedingly. Now, Janet" —

"Why didn't Janet carry the breakfast away?" asked Nordhall, laughing; he too had recovered himself a little. Their eyes met with a fearless gladness.

"Oh, I *knew* Janet wanted to finish a letter to Jacobs. *She* has never studied Greek," added

Mrs. Strong pensively. "I feel so much more on a level with her, you can't think! I really was n't sorry when that university began its term. I think they called it a semester. When I asked her for the rolls, I felt as if she were mentally commenting, 'Ladies' Greek, without the accents.' My inferiority to Janet is less marked. How long did you say you were going to stay?"

"Till Monday."

"That is a good while."

"Are you sorry?"

"Not just this minute. You saved the tray from tumbling down. That punch bowl — chicken broth — belonged to the landlady's great-great-grandfather. She adores it."

"How is your mother?"

"Oh, so much better! We drive every day; we have a lovely time. The forks are plated, but we brought the mattresses from home. She criticises the doughnuts, but one can put Albert biscuit in the trunks. If it were n't for the stone china, she would be reconciled to the Franconia range, I think. And Dr. Bishop writes twice a week. We really have a lovely time."

"Can I see Madam Strong?"

"She would n't see the angel Michael till after

dinner. Then she will be most happy. I must go and take this tray somewhere. I don't know but Mrs. Brandy will expect me to help wash the dishes."

"Who, pray, is Mrs. Brandy?"

"Why, the landlady! Is n't it a nice name?"

"What do you do mornings, before Madam Strong drives?"

"Oh, sometimes I sit on the piazza; or I walk a good deal. There 's a charming old grave-yard here I walk in. Sometimes I go towards the Notch. Janet stays with her mornings, and she sleeps. Sometimes I read, or perhaps I write letters. Everybody writes letters in Bethlehem. You can't think how many I 've written! I wrote six pages to Mr. Griggs last night. I have n't spoken to a soul, since I 've been here, outside the house, unless you count the postmaster, or the old man that drives pigs by at four in the morning and wakes mother up; and once I met a little girl in the grave-yard. And we are the only boarders! You can't think how lovely it is! I have n't had an invitation (oh, yes, there was what they call a 'gathering' at the church vestry, and they wanted me to come, but fortunately I had a toothache), and I have n't made a call, and there is n't a drunkard in Bethlehem!"

"Put on your hat, then, and come to walk with me," said Nordhall.

"I will go and see," answered Reliance, as if she had been a little girl.

She returned in a few minutes, with a white straw hat tied over her hair by a black veil. She held her thick white shawl over her arm. He took the shawl as if he had been used to doing so every day; and as if they had been used to walking together every day, they went out into the morning.

"How I should like to walk to the Profile!" cried Reliance gayly, as they passed down the street.

"How far is it?"

"Oh, only nine miles."

"We might begin," suggested he, smiling indulgently, as if she *had* been a child.

"You can't think how odd it seems to have anybody to walk with."

"Pleasant, I hope?"

"Why, yes, very pleasant."

They chatted in this commonplace way till they had left the village, and struck into the solitary mountain road. (The necessity of being original has taken the comfort out of more friendships than the culture of dullness has ruined.)

Then, when they were quite alone, she stopped talking. They had walked fast; he saw that she was tired, and he asked her to sit and rest by the roadside. She did so at once. The sun was warm and direct, and she said she never took cold.

"I did not get your note till Monday," said Nordhall immediately.

"No. Of course not."

"I wanted to come up on Tuesday."

"I am glad you thought better of it. *This* is bad enough."

"What can you possibly mean?" cried he, his astonishment clearly over-mastering all other feeling.

"I don't know how to tell you," said Reliance indistinctly. Then he saw how she caught her breath, and that she suffered genuine embarassment.

"What was that note about, any way?" he demanded. His quivering emotion at seeing her distress lent a thrill like anger to his tone. "What had happened?"

"Something dreadful, — *dreadful!*"

"You did not seem to find it very dreadful when you saw me this morning."

"No. I almost forgot. I meant to forget when

I came up here. And I *don't* care as much about it as I did when I wrote that note."

"If you could only give me the slightest clew to what you mean," — began the man, helplessly.

"You might know what I mean!" cried the woman, rationally.

"I 'm not an imaginative fellow," said Nordhall, hitting some rose berries sulkily with his cane. "All I know is that you distress me beyond measure. If anything dreadful has happened to you, I ought to know it, whether it is any of my my concern or not," he added doggedly.

"It does concern you," said Reliance, with sudden courage. "It concerns us both. It is something people said."

"Oh! Is *that* all?"

"*All?* Why, they said — they said" —

"They said we were engaged to be married. Certainly. Why, I have heard that scores of times.".

"You never told me! You never" —

"Why should I trouble you? Why, my dear friend, tell me, why should we either of us be troubled over a petty thing like that? See this thistle beyond the rosebush. I touch it with my cane, — no, I breathe on it from this distance. It

is gone. Look! The four winds of heaven hold all that gossamer. Shall I go and gather it for you, and pack it up again in a purple calyx? Does it fall on you and me, sitting here? We are on our way to the Profile. Nobody notices, thinks, cares, says. We can walk arm-in-arm, if you like, all the way, and not meet any living soul. Oh, turn your head and look through those rose berries at the sky! Can you see the shadows on Franconia? That same cloud casts a darkness on your hair. See, we are alone. Why should you fret, or mind?"

He turned his head upon his hand, and looked at her dreamily. But now he saw that she was deeply annoyed.

"But I do mind, — I did mind very much indeed. I do not like to hear such things. They are an insult. They hurt me. I am John Strong's wife. I do not intend to marry" —

"I have never" — He checked himself.

"No, you have never asked me," she said, without a blush. "Even if you wished it — and I know you do not wish it — you would not be so cruel."

He did not answer this; and after a moment he suggested: —

"Let us walk on."

"Let us walk back," she said wearily. "I can't get to the Profile. I am not as strong as I thought."

"Sometimes I 'm afraid I hope you are not," he murmured impetuously.

"I did not understand you?"

"I am sorry you are tired. Take my arm, — do. Why should you not? Now let us talk of this. What are we to do about this 'dreadful thing'?"

Looking up, — for she took his arm, — she saw the mischief in his eyes.

"You can laugh at me!" she cried.

"At *you*? Oh, no, no! At *it*. Yes, I can. Reliance Strong, I think this terrible calamity you speak of is only fit to be laughed at. I think it was unworthy of you to pay that rumor the deference of one pang or tear."

"How did you know I cried over it?"

"I don't know much, it is true, but I know *you*." She was silent now; her agitation subsiding in gentle waves.

"Then, what do you think we ought to do about it?" she asked, more quietly.

"Do? I should scorn to 'do' anything. You and I understand each other" —

"And John," she interrupted.

"And John — Yes. We all understand each other. You need me. I need you. If a rational man and woman in a rational state of society cannot pursue a rational friendship without contemplating or perpetrating a marriage engagement, either by accident or design, then civilization is a failure."

"It seems to me I have somewhere read that civilization *is* a failure."

"Now what do you mean by that?" He stopped short, looked at her, but perceived the innocent malice of her interruption, and hastened eagerly on: "And if ever a man and woman could be — could do this thing, I believe you and I are that woman and man."

"I have hoped so," she admitted tremulously; she too was in earnest now.

"I don't hope so!" cried Nordhall, boyishly. "I know so. See, Reliance, my comfort, my strength, — Look at me! Would you give me up for *that?*"

She lifted her face. She saw the October sky above his tall height, and the mountains, like witnesses at a solemn pledge, seemed to gather themselves together about them. She met his

eyes. They overflowed with protecting tenderness; grave, guarded, — grand, she thought.

"Do you think," he asked gently, "that *I* would not be the first to see anything that could trouble you, — anything we must notice or regard, that you could fitly pay attention to? Do you think *I* would not care for all these little things? Leave them," he pleaded, "to me. Just take the comfort of my friendship — if it is a little comfort — without fret or worry. I cannot bear to worry you. Will you not trust me?"

"I will trust you," she murmured gravely, "and I will not give you up for this."

They had a pleasant Sabbath. Nordhall even went to church with her in the morning, and heard the theology of Bethlehem without demur; he was too happy to care what he was asked to believe. Madam Strong, too, received him graciously; she was glad to see somebody from home. He sat with the ladies in the great boarding-house parlor, and Reliance played church anthems for her mother on the hoarse piano. He dined with them, too, and praised the doughnuts.

Then they sat on the piazza a little while, and became historical, and thirsted for information, and discussed positions not dissimilar in human

experience to their own. They mentioned the acquaintances of celebrated women and men. Mrs. Strong remembered that Vittoria Colonna and Michael Angelo were friends. Nordhall spoke of Madame Récamier and Châteaubriand, of Madame Swetchine and the Count de Maistre, of Fénelon and Madame Guyon; and then Reliance recalled Robertson and Lady Byron; and Cowper and Mrs. — Who was it? She forgot the name! These people had friendship. They *would* have it. They knew how to have it. They had taught the world to respect it. They had done the race that divine service.

Mrs. Strong and Mr. Nordhall looked into each other's eyes on the boarding-house piazza in the Sunday noon of the Bethlehem October, and discussed their indebtedness to these great persons.

In the afternoon Reliance proposed visiting that old cemetery, but he objected; his heart did not turn any more to graves. Instead, he asked her to drive to the Profile, and after some hesitation, her mother urging it (Reliance had been so prisoned in the sick-room of late), she consented to go. Nordhall found a good horse; they started early, and were home an hour before tea. It was a quiet ride. They did not talk of matters

which trouble or excite. They said nothing of friendship and civilization, or of service to the race. They shared thoughts, and what in New England we love to call "views." They did not discuss feelings. Reliance returned calmed and strengthened.

She felt that she could not be thankful enough for the friendliness of this firm and unselfish man. Nothing had occurred to mar the repose of their ride. When they had sat together below the Great Stone Face, neither had spoken. The sky spoke, and the hills, the eternal solitude, and the granite lips.

Her own little lot seemed small to her as she looked up. What was solitude? What, a short life of trouble? Who but a coward could refuse to endure whatever had an end? She pierced her fate with these brave challenges. We are all of us apt to employ ourselves with this kind of sharp-shooting at those crises of our history when we are least solitary and most content.

As for Nordhall, he was mainly occupied with wondering what he ought to do about that veil. He could not quite look that old fellow on the mountain in the eye, with a piece of stolen gauze in his left breast-pocket.

When he came to bid her good-by that evening, for he was to take a start too early to disturb Mrs. Brandy's household, he battled with himself about this little thing. They were alone in the huge bare parlor, which the lady and the open fire redeemed from intolerable unhomeliness. She stood by the hearth. The barren room seemed hung with cloth of gold. He had not expected to find it so hard to leave her.

He had twice bidden her good-night before he came back, and without preface or apology said, —

"I found your veil in the church-yard. I have kept it."

"*You* found it? Yes; I lost it Friday."

She put out her hands, as if to reclaim it. But he shook his head.

"I don't know about that," said Reliance gravely.

"Then take it!" He drew it from his breast and held it out to her.

"What good can it do you? I do not like — I am not used — I never do such things." She hesitated and stammered.

"Why don't you take it?"

But she did not take it. She looked perplexed and pained.

"I don't want to be foolish," she said humbly.

"Then let me keep the thing," he answered, in a comfortable tone. "I never had anything that belonged to you. I took a fancy to this. It seems to me you might trust me with it."

She looked at him searchingly; he returned her gaze with clear and quiet eyes; she did not take the veil; they shook hands, and he went away.

He went away and out into the silent, awfully silent, village. He did not go back to his hotel till nearly midnight. He walked and walked and walked, over the deserted and now chilly roads. There was no wind. It was supernaturally still. In the glows and glooms between the houses where the lights were going out, he could see the dull outlines of head-stones in that church-yard. He hurried past it.

"I'm walking as if ghosts were at my heels!" he said aloud, at last, and stopped short. He made a sharp turn and went back to the hotel. He ordered something, he could not have told what, — something hot; he did not touch it. He continued to walk and to walk, up and down his

forlorn little room. He walked till it was one o'clock.

There was but one book in the room, supposed to be the one of all others which hotel guests chiefly and habitually spend their traveling time in reading. He noticed this Bible lying on the empty table by the solitary, tall kerosene light. He went and sat down by it, and held it, unopened, in his hand a minute. He looked haggard and old. Once he turned over his shoulder a look not without fear.

Presently the whole tension of the man softened and yielded. He put the Bible down. He took out of his breast the silver veil, and laid it upon the Holy Book, stretched his hands upon them both, with a gesture infinitely protecting, tender, and pathetic, and pressed his cheek upon his hand, solemnly like one at prayer.

But this action brought his lips in contact with the warm bit of gauze. Suddenly he snatched it to them, and kissed it again and again and again. . . . . All was over now.

A man of honor could be the victim, but not the culprit, of these terrible illusions.

Friendliness? Pity? *Friendship?* Then pity was a passion and friendship an omnipotent love.

XI.

"I would define a true friend to be one who will serve his companions next to his God." — M. FARADY.

CHARLES NORDHALL went back to Salem, and took the business train as usual every morning for Boston, and took it again as usual every night for home, and occupied himself with the real-estate business. This being a diversion which came to an end with daylight, he dreaded his evenings and nights. He paced his room (his housekeeper heard him) with habitual restlessness; he became sleepless, and therefore despondent; his case began to seem to him a complicated one.

At first, he busied himself in thinking how he should manage to return her veil. The sight of it sent the blood tingling with brave shame to his fingers' ends. It was as if one looked him in the eye, and said, "You are a dishonorable man!"

He could not remember when in all his clean and gentle life he had betrayed a trust before.

The slightness of this offense was small comfort to an offender capable of perceiving its subtlety. At times he thought that if he had speculated with her money he should feel less remorse, and perhaps be no more blameworthy. He dreaded her return, when he must give back that insulted piece of gauze, and invent some decent reason to satisfy her suspicions or hurt surprise.

The more he thought of it, however, the more foolish — nay, impossible — it seemed to give it back now, at all. What could he tell her? That he had ceased to value her keepsake? What could he tell her? That he had kissed it in the Bethlehem hotel?

He took the thing and hid it away in a little old ivory box he had, that was his mother's; he put the box into a desk that stood in one of the great rooms of his empty house; he locked the desk, he locked the room, he put the keys away.

Now, the sensitive fellow breathed freer, and began with more calm, if no less pain, to investigate the position in which he found himself.

He loved her. The holy truth was out at last. He loved her. No mood nor phase of feeling retracted, or disguised, or modified this terrible and blessed secret. For it was a secret yet, thank

God! — his, and his only. He was glad he had found himself out in time. Sometimes he felt like going down on his knees, as he used to when he was a little boy, and thanking God that he had never yet "made love" to her. No; he had made friendship; that was all. Aside from that matter of the veil, he had no cause to reproach himself yet (so he thought at times) with willful disloyalty to the confidence which she had reposed in him when she had accepted his constant interest in her life, his incessant contributions to her comfort, his deferent, distant tenderness, his help, his strength, his blind and bountiful idealization.

And yet he loved her. There was no return from this accepted consciousness. It was irrevocable in its way, like birth or death, the marriage tie itself, or any of the elemental facts of life. He could not "*un*love" if he would. He was almost terrified to perceive, after he had thought of it a little while, that he would not if he could. . . . . He had never loved a woman before. All the purity of boyhood and all the loneliness of maturity fed this feeling which was now the master of him. If he had known affection and touched fancy, he had never experienced a passion. At once it seemed to him the neces-

sary condition of existence. He welcomed this cruel rapture. Better to love her, oh, best, a thousand times, though he put the deserts between them, or called on the mountains to cover him from the lightning of her rebuking eyes!

At times he was elated over her in his secret thought. She would not know it. She could not help it. It was as if the fact of his love gave him a power of possession. No other man could love her as he did, understand her as he did. What other, then, could come so near?

And then he would remember that another had come nearer than he — though he had all eternity to approach her in — could ever hope or dream to be.

And after this he would sit and say to himself, "And John Strong trusted me. I have failed him. I am a disloyal friend."

Nordhall was not, at this crisis in his history, a profoundly religious man; but, as distinguished from what, for want of a better term, we vaguely call in our day "unbelievers," he believed. At least he entertained no more serious doubts than the most of us, as to whether what we know as death is in reality birth into another life.

Perhaps no man can be as constantly as he

had been, for years now, in the immediate atmosphere of a trustful woman's faith, without unconsciously inhaling it. Her unswerving assurance that her husband was alive, had not been without its influence upon their friend.

The most important effect of the discovery that he had just made within himself was therefore a profound moral shock. It was as if he loved another man's wife.

More than this, had he not deceived himself and her, if not that dead man? Had he not burned false fires upon the altar of a pure and unsuspecting friendship?

Sometimes this seemed to him the worst of it. He had not only ruined a happiness more exquisite than he deserved, and disturbed a relation which might have illuminated his whole life and hers, but he had done so under what was a kind of disguise that in his most excited moments he called a dishonor, and in his calmer ones a misfortune. He alternately blamed and pitied himself. He passionately regarded that tide of feeling which had tossed him adrift and awreck, now as if he had been an intelligent and unguarded pilot, now as if he were a weed upon the foam of the wave.

In fact, before she had returned to Salem, and long before he had made up his mind what course to pursue in future, the stout fellow was worn sick (he had never been really strong since that blow) with his throes of heart and conscience. He suffered all that a sensitive man could suffer in such a position, and what none but a sensitive man can understand. If you think him a foolish fellow, given to superstitions, obtuse to his own main chance, and morbidly considerate of inconceivable claims, which a healthy good sense, like your own, would dissipate like ghosts at a *séance*, — *este procul profani!* His history is not written for such as you.

Yet this delicate and honorable soul was not without its hearty human essence. Far more keenly than a more imaginative man, who had yet been spun of the same moral texture, Nordhall was awake to the practical sense of his position. He had none of the high fine ardors and illusions of the poetic temperament to sustain him on a ground against which his vigorous and cheerful nature rebelled with all its might. He only wished, with his whole heart, to do what was absolutely right; not right in the make-shift sense which so many of our hard-pressed decisions put

into the stern word, but right as right could be, — right in effect, and in motive too. He really wanted to do, not so much what was happiest for himself, as what was best for his two friends, the living and the dead.

Yet if it were possible to eliminate from one's estimate of character such a moral fact as this, we should say that Charles Nordhall was no exceptional nature. He was abundantly and blessedly like other people.

Indeed, he had always thought himself, except, perhaps, in a little fastidiousness of taste about women, like other men, — a conviction which in itself cannot be overestimated as a power of guidance through moral emergencies.

Now, too, he loved a woman, like other men. And now, — God knew! — it might be that like other men —

Oh, no; oh, *no, no!* His soul cried out within him when it came to that. He could have throttled the instinct, as if it had been a flesh-and-blood antagonist, met in the dark, which suggested to him that he might ever win that other happiness, more blessed, more bitter, more blind, than friendship; that he might teach her trustful eyes to turn to him, in time, that other look. He

had seen it once, — one day when her husband came home unexpectedly in Boston. No man could forget who had ever seen it. Hers was not the "counterfeit" tenderness of what have been called the "pipe-clay" natures. She, too, was a woman like other women; not great, nor wise, nor uncommon, except in this capacity of love. She was made of "rose-red clay." She was dipped and saturated through and through in that divine and eternally fast color, long before she was molded into this or that form or fitness to this or that niche of life. She was a woman whose love would *last* a man. If any created tenderness could outlive one world and serve to supply another, Nordhall believed that tenderness was hers. Making the allowance for the lover's emphasis, he was not, perhaps, far wrong.

And now she was coming home again, what should he do? Already the November elegy was in the winds of evening. The November frosts broke in the crisp morning, beneath his restless foot. There would be freezing flowers in the garden when she came home, — in three days, in two, in one, to-morrow. What should he do?

He spent that last night in an agitation which he determined should never shake him again.

"I 'm man enough for that yet, I hope," he said. He walked the floor almost all night. Between two and three, he went down into his library to have it out. It was warmer there, and he felt stronger, less deserted, than in the empty second story. The coals were still bright in the grate. He sat by them shivering and bowed, like an old man. He suddenly realized that he had not been very well of late. The strong fellow looked at his hands and muscular arms with a pathetic scorn.

"And she so frail," he said aloud. He held the hand up to the light. It was growing thin.

There must be an end to that.

Should he go away, — to China, Paris, Patagonia? *Coward!*

Should he stay and tell her what had happened? Put spaces and silences and bars and guards and miseries between them? Leave her to mourn and suffer, and break her gentle heart with pity? Leave her to miss him, now that he had taught her to lean on him? Compel her to battle alone, whom he had comraded so bravely and so long, — yes, and so honorably, thank God! The more he thought of it, the more he came to take the icy comfort of this, — that he had been

an honorable comrade. He had not meant to turn aside to this treachery. Because he had been cruel enough to love her, must she, therefore, be denied friend, friendliness, all?

God forbid!

Oh, what then? Should he try his chances, like a man? After all, *there are quick, and there are dead.* It was not John Strong who was the live human creature, with life before him, with its famine on him. . . . . Suppose he tried, only tried, like any other man, to win her?

He looked about the room. Delirious visions of her possessed it. His eye roved from one piece to another of the old crimson leather-covered furniture. He could see her standing there against all that color. She sank into the deep-elbowed chair. She waited for him, a beautiful phantasm. It seemed to him that if he crossed the room he could touch it. It seemed to him that if he once did that it would all be settled, and he should go out to-morrow, like any other man, and woo his own.

His own? You who had her three years living and five years dead, — John Strong! Come from the grave and answer! Can a live man claim his own?

He sank down again, shivering, by the little blaze; he threw on wood; he crouched, and somehow began to get warmer. He would think it all out. He knew now what he meant to do. He would have it quite clear, soon.

He stirred the blaze, and began to chafe his own hands as if he were restoring a person in a faint.

He perceived then that his first duty was to go up-stairs and get some sleep. He started at once with a firm step.

"If there 's any manhood left in me, I 'll put it to the proof!" he said aloud. "I will not tell her! And she shall not lose her friend."

XII.

"My God, my Father, and my Friend,
Do not forsake me at my end."
TRANSLATION OF DIES IRÆ.

DESPITE the Bethlehem doughnuts, Madam Strong did not regain her health. It might have been owing to the stone china, but Franconia failed.

While the Indian summer burned the heart out of October, while the haze wrapped the hills in violet, and the leaves fell slowly in scented heaps beneath feeble feet, and the noons kindled gentle fires for invalids creeping out, the State of New Hampshire justified Dr. Bishop's kind opinion, and made it clearer than ever why the best people in Salem employed him.

From the day, from the hour, that advancing November whistled down the mountains (it was the 26th of the month, at three in the afternoon, with the change of the wind from the south), the old lady shivered to the heart, said she was homesick, and must go. They would telegraph the doctor, lest he should think her disobedient.

The next night the breakers cried in their ears, the fog beat into their lungs, the familiar easterly rain blinded their eyes, Kaiser leaped rapturously upon them, and they were at home.

The doctor came to the house in the course of the evening, with that leisurely interest in an old patient which answers all the purpose of anxiety, and costs far less expenditure of sympathy; in a certain class of cases the physician's main capital. He stayed some time, chatting gayly of indifferent matters. Madam Strong felt a little hurt that he did not count her pulse, but would have died sooner than mention the omission. She was not certain if the doctor realized how tired she was. He talked a good deal with Reliance.

"*You* have thrived on Bethlehem," he said, carelessly. Reliance felt her cheeks blaze. Yet it was evident that Dr. Bishop had forgotten his impertinence of that other evening. She knew that it was childish in her to remember it. He looked over her, through her, with his calm, scientific gaze, but not *at* her, as he did before. She was thankful for this. It did not occur to her that the first duty of science is to know *when* to observe. So she too forgot about that little brush between herself and the doctor, as was fortunate,

even though her mother did not call him often, and especially so if she did. When he came down-stairs, his manner changed; he said, —

"Your mother has taken cold. You need not tell her that I am coming in the morning."

"Do you mean" — began Reliance. She turned pale and faint.

"I mean nothing to-night. Follow my directions. Get up where it is warm, and to bed yourself. I will be here at quarter of nine."

Reliance had all the inexperience of illness which youth and health ought to involve, and her mind awakened slowly to the facts. But long before the doctor came, she understood that she shared the house with danger. She had gone to bed herself a little while, between midnight and dawn. But at four Janet called her. She held the sufferer in her arms, upon the great, square Strong pillows. She felt dazed and stunned; not as yet conscious of acute anxiety or distress. Her most distinct thought was a profound gratitude that they were not at Mrs. Brandy's, in that cold corridor, and had not to put medicine into tumblers half an inch thick, with stone-china preserve plates on top to hold the spoon. She had not imagination enough to conceive of the consequences,

if her mother had been forced to call that village doctor.

Dr. Bishop testified his anxiety by his punctuality, and, after all, Reliance found that strange form of relief which we gain by setting one misery as foil to another, in exchanging her indistinct alarm for a distinct terror.

"Your mother has pneumonia. If the typhoidal type sets in, she will not, at her age, recover. I do not, however, expect this."

Reliance listened to the doctor very quietly. She was so calm that he regarded her twice, — once with the professional, once with the personal gaze. They were standing in the front hall, at the foot of the stairs. Reliance had her hand on the banister. The doctor was buttoning his heavy coat, bringing his eyebrows together in his intent way.

The bell rang while they stood talking, and Janet admitted Nordhall. He had just heard. He came at once, as was natural, to offer his services and sympathy. The two men regarded each other as the physician, bowing, passed out. Nordhall's whole face was a warrior, and put up a shield.

Reliance stayed down a few minutes and talked

with her friend. She was comforted to see him. She looked lovelier (a few women do) for being tired, and her white wool wrapper heightened her pallor. He blamed himself for thinking of these things at such a time. She told him how kind Dr. Bishop was, and that she hoped everything from such skill and patience. She spoke courageously. She was determined not to yield to her fears. And Dr. Bishop was so much "strength" (she had already caught this phrase from his patients) at such a time.

"Dr. Bishop is a widower," said Nordhall brusquely. He had not meant to say it. He had not meant to let the barbaric, elemental instinct flash out like this. How could he know he should be capable of a feeling so debasing, on an occasion so calculated to bring out the noblest of a man?

Nothing of the kind had ever happened to him before. The worst surprises of our natures overtake us not at our weakest, but at our most thoughtless moments.

When he came in and saw them there, it was as if a mighty hand had taken hold of his heart. It had never occurred to him, in all these years, that any other man could approach her in any

way. Now, this fellow who played with life and death, could relieve or create her sufferings, could kill or cure the poor old lady, — stood with her in a world apart. For that instant Nordhall could have hated him and it. He could not conceive that she could be any less of a vision and a despair to another man than she was to himself. So the words leaped.

"And I," she gently said, "am a widow." She gave him a little calm smile. She might have turned him out of the house, he felt; he was almost ashamed to look her in the eye. She lifted her hands with that gesture which always set him beside himself.

"We won't talk of such things. The doctor never *thinks* of them. And I — am pretty tired — and glad, very glad, to see you. But I ought to go. You will come soon again? I thank you — we all thank you for this. It is a comfort to see you."

This was all she had to say; it was more than enough. Nordhall went away abased, intoxicated, and triumphant.

But Madam Strong grew very ill. And the intense existence which the presence of serious illness creates in the well, seized upon every occu-

pant of the calm old house. Even Kaiser had the air of living upon his nerves. Reliance herself was especially confused with a sense of dual life. All this watching and wearying, this loving and longing and praying for the mother of her husband, struck and bared nerves over which the tissues had toughened. When Nordhall called with his ready sympathy, she came out from a world of memories to meet him. She had to adjust her thoughts to him. Yet she went back to her task, her prayer, her watch, nay to her memory, the stronger for that sympathy.

At the outset of her illness, Mrs. Winthrop L. Strong made her will and had a private conversation with her daughter-in-law, in which she discussed many family matters of interest to them both. This was quietly and fearlessly done. Madam Strong did not expect to die, but she knew Dr. Bishop's opinion of pneumonia at sixty-five. None of the Strongs had ever committed the impropriety of leaving the world without a proper disposition of their affairs. It was due to the family that Reliance should be in doubt about nothing. This done, she calmly settled her face, looking now more than ever like frail old porcelain, upon the dignified pillows that death itself

would not dare to rumple, and put herself in her doctor's hands.

"And the Lord's," sobbed Reliance, one day, kissing her.

"Oh, yes, and the Lord's, of course," said the old lady, with pious carelessless. The Lord was so evidently a secondary consideration in the case, that it seemed unnecessary to mention him to Dr. Bishop's patients.

There was something fine, after all, poor old soul, in this stately yet abandoned dependence. Madam Strong had always held pronounced views touching the humility of ignorance, especially in the laity, whether ecclesiastical or scientific. Down at the bottom of her placid soul was one spark of fire. She thought it rather grand to know where and whom to trust. All her life she had obeyed reverence and reverenced obedience. This is a habit of mind which makes it easier to have pneumonia at sixty-five. One sends for the clergyman. One summons the family physician. With the rest one has nothing to do.

"Dr. Bishop speaks hopefully, mother, dear," Reliance would say. And then would come the earnest, unvarying whisper, —

"The doctor *knows*."

"He has taken me through very severe illnesses," she said one day, most peacefully. "*I've never died yet.* We trust the bridge that carries us over. I do not expect to die, my dear, in Dr. Bishop's hands."

There grew to be something inexpressibly touching, in the very front of death, in this unquestioning hope; and that little weakness about the doctor, which Reliance used to smile at, now went to her heart. Nay, now the weakness had become strength.

Such, Dr. Bishop said, were the patients a physician could save if he could any. Their chance was doubled. If she fretted or rebelled, she would have no chance. And such were the patients it — to lose — took the life out of a man —

The doctor's fine eyes filled. He held the old lady's hand in both his own, as if she had been his child. She had been his patient a good many years.

"I'm sorry to suffer so much, Doctor," said Madam Strong, apologetically. "Don't mind! I'm sure that last medicine will give relief. I shall be — better" —

She repeated this phrase at intervals, when too weak for connected sentences. "I shall be — better — *The doctor knows.*" It was impossible, however, for her to talk much. Reliance, as she sat alone with her, especially when it was her turn to watch at night, bent over the sick woman sometimes with confused longings to say words for which she never found a safe and fitting time. If her mother died, in spite of Dr. Bishop (and the Lord), she would go to heaven. John was in heaven. It was to be expected, it would be natural (if heaven were a natural place at all) that he would meet his mother immediately. . . . . Was there anything in the law or the gospel, in good sense or good Christianity, to prevent her from sending a message to John?

Reliance thought she would do so, by and by.

But by and by her mother rallied, and seemed so much improved that they sent for the doctor in glad haste to witness the important change. This was on the fifteenth day of her illness.

Dr. Bishop came in, filling the room with his alert but quiet presence. His old patient was propped up on the pillows; behind her, the faithful young daughterly arms. Reliance, as the physician entered, glanced keenly up, and looked away.

"You see, Doctor," — Madam Strong turned her triumphant smile upon him, — "you see how much better! I told you I could not die in your hands."

To emphasize her words she placed her shadowy hand on his, as if it had been a weight which he must carry; and softly adding, "I shall get well, now. You need not be anxious about me any longer, Doctor! I *knew you knew*" — fell asleep, and woke no more where human trust in human weakness can be wounded or disturbed. She died believing in her doctor. Is it impossible that she may (in a state where capacity for faith is the first condition of existence) the more easily, therefore, believe in her Lord?

It was the daughter who had to turn comforter that night. The physician was quite broken down. Reliance got him down-stairs, and had a fire lighted, and made him sit by it. She assured him that they were satisfied with everything. She begged him to consider how faithful he had been, and kind. She reminded him how fond of him her mother was, would be, "will always be," she faltered. She leaned over him assuringly. His sensitiveness to that last scene deeply moved her.

"If there's anything in it," cried the man of science, rebelliously pacing the long, splendid, sorrowful rooms, — "in all this they profess about what comes after (God knows! it's no more senseless than some other things we believe), — if there's any truth in it, I say, how do you think she'll feel to wake up dead and find I hadn't saved her, after all that trust? .... I never had *just* such a case. True. It was her time to die. She had lived her life. She was ripe. But to be trusted like that, and for her to die *telling you so!* It's fortunate a man doesn't have such scenes to go through every day. It would tear him to pieces. You must excuse me. I have been up for four successive nights. I am less strong than usual, and I did not expect so sudden a turn to this case. I pray you to pardon me for forgetting myself, and you, like this" —

At this moment Reliance felt, rather than saw, that Nordhall was beside them. He had entered unannounced. There was nothing for him to say. There was nothing for any of them to say. The physician lingered only to take Reliance miserably by the hand, and passed out. He scarcely noticed the other man, whose impressions of himself no more entered his imagination at such a mo-

ment, than the fluctuations of a case of influenza, or the food that he had ordered for his last baby. His was an experience beside which the vagaries of Platonic friendship would have seemed in deed and truth of less importance than the nature of arrowroot or the strength of mustard plaster. He might have said that his life was too real for phantasms. Yet with that reservation which his nature and his profession left for interests not directly bearing upon scientific truth, he appreciated Mrs. Strong. When he had no anxious cases in hand he even admired her. But that dead old patient up-stairs touched pulses in his soul finer than any woman's soft young finger-tip could count. He went alone to his temperament. He turned in that solemn hour to his unshared experience. Nordhall and Reliance, who were not scientific, turned to each other.

They turned to each other, like children, with the scathing honesty of grief. One look of hers was all he needed; that other man vanished from his world, too, as if he had been a breath upon a frosty window wiped out by a warm hand. He, *he*, could befriend her. She needed *him*. He comforted her. He leaned above her, and silently thanked God for so much as this. He was glad

she could give up and cry now, poor girl, all she would, and that she did not seem to mind it that he was there.

When she lifted her face, wet, warm, and sweet, to try and speak to him, she said, "If it is all true, what we believe, she has *seen* him!"

He really did not understand her at the moment, and he said so. She glanced up towards the room. Already it seemed days that death had been in the house.

It was not without a touch of fear that Reliance answered: —

"Why, mother has seen John!" It comforted her to have some one to say it to.

XIII.

"Happiness is a kind of energy. . . . . Now to a solitary person life is burthensome; for it is not easy to energize constantly by one's self."

ARISTOTLE.

WE are always surprised at the last, even by expected death, as we are surprised by the lightning-flash for which we have been holding our breath.

The brief illness which had reunited John Strong's mother to her son, left his wife, more than might have been, stunned and alone. She was not conscious till it was all over, how she had been bound to her past by the daily presence and insistence of ties which gave cohesion to memory and adhesion to duty. Now it seemed almost as if she had been widowed again. There was nothing left of her husband in the world, — nothing but this old home of his (hers now), through which thought traveled like the haunted, and feeling like a prisoner.

Reliance had a healthy way of bearing trouble, and it was with no morbid luxuriousness of grief that her instinct sought solitude. She was sur-

prised when Nordhall came in, one day, and asked her whom she should have to spend the winter with her.

"Why, Janet and Jacobs, and Kaiser, of course."

"No one else?"

"I do not want anybody else. They take excellent care of me."

"I had thought," suggested he, hesitatingly, "that it would be pleasanter if some lady friend" —

"Well?" for he paused. "No; it would not be pleasanter. I said so."

"Better, then," he added firmly. "I think, if I were you, I would send for somebody. I do not like to have you here alone."

"You speak urgently," she said, after some thought. She knitted her brows.

"I at least speak honestly."

"Thank you. I know you do. There is no one but Myrtle. Myrtle might come. I suppose her brother's wife could spare her. I have a cousin Jane somewhere. But I don't like my cousin Jane. I've been separated from what relatives I have, marrying so young; I have n't many. There is no one very near. I was such

a little girl when my father and mother died! But I loved my auntie who took care of me. It was the year we were married that *she* died." Her thoughts had strayed; her eyes had the liquid look that precedes or prevents tears. "There is no one I should quite like to call upon to come and live with me. One does not realize these things till one is truly quite alone. But why should I have some one this winter, more than all winters?"

"It may be that you will want some one every winter," he answered slowly.

"Do you mean that you think it is n't *suitable* for me to live here alone?" asked Reliance, with a flash of feeling, — "a widow of my years, with her servants. You grow incredibly conventional, Mr. Nordhall!"

"I did not say it was unsuitable."

"It might be, for all I should ever have thought of it!" said she nervously.

Now really, at the bottom of Nordhall's mind or heart lay a thought or feeling which he shrank from expressing. He could not have denied that he might consider it preferable for her to be less alone, since he frequented the house as much as he did, and would. He could not say this to her.

But he could think for her. He could not bear that she should not be sensitive to any little conventionality which was truly deserving of respect, nor, on the other hand, could he bear to have her forced to dwell upon such matters. Perhaps he had never before practically realized the indefiniteness of their position as regarded each other. As he went home that afternoon and thought it over, it seemed to him to be without adjustment to the rest of the world; it missed likenesses and visible precedents, and puzzled him. He perceived with clear sadness why it had not puzzled her. His self-acknowledged feeling was a scorching illuminator to him. His love gave him new senses, with which he grasped unentered conditions. She had no such senses, because she had no such love. The simplicity of her feeling was beautiful, but terrible, to him.

If her simplicity after this conversation was less direct than he supposed, she gave no sign.

She wandered about the house alone that evening, oppressed to suffocation with the solitude of her life. A Platonic friend cannot stay too late, nor be on hand at the exact crisis of one's need. He cannot even come too often.

She sought her mother's room, where the last

unfinished baby-sock lay on the light-stand, where the old lady had left it the day she tried in vain to knit, after her illness was begun. The work-basket in half-mourning stood upon the bureau. Those volumes of Scott they carried to Bethlehem were in the yet unpacked trunks. The Heart of Mid-Lothian lay by itself upon the lower shelf of the bookcase, awaiting the annual December reading. It would be December, now, in a very little while. Reliance felt her heart yearn over every weakness or oddity, each household habit or whim, belonging to the gentle life whose close seemed to have left her, somehow, as unprotected as a child. She cried that evening like a child. She looked backwards with dull longing. She looked forwards with dull fear. What world was this she was about to enter? John was not of it, nor John's kin. She seemed to have made a false beginning to a foreign life. She sat down before she went to bed and wrote, inviting Myrtle Snowe to spend the winter.

Janet came in about nine o'clock, and said: "Mrs. Strong, dear?"

There was nobody but Janet to say Good-night to. Oh yes, and Kaiser.

Nordhall sat in the library with the red leather

furniture. The housekeeper came in for orders, and went away. He had no dog, and his cigar could not say Good-night. He threw it aside with a faint disgust. He never quite liked to smoke when he was thinking of her. He blamed himself for having disturbed her with his suggestion that afternoon, as he would have blamed himself if he had not. He was conscious of a new, an urgent, responsibility for her, omnipresent as Deity, and almost as solemn to the lover's thought. It was because his *was* the lover's thought. The nature of his feeling could no more help altering the nature of his relation to her than December or June could help altering the golden lilies in her garden.

And yet, so far as her consciousness or interests were concerned, this indefinite change was now an advantage. Nordhall knew that he had grown graver, calmer. He did not lose poise in her presence. The self-control which his self-knowledge now required of him, extended itself to the minutest act. In the quaint old sacred phrase, he was "exercised thereby." He was like the athlete who is a better racer for being able to stand on his head.

"I should like to know if she *is* lonely,"

thought Nordhall, looking around the library. But he had been there two evenings this week. He must resolutely refrain from an over-mitigation of her solitude. Such was one of the penalties of their anomalous position. He was not her brother. He was not her lover. Society had no code for an absorbed friend.

The winter set in quietly. The flowers froze in the garden, the breakers cried from the shore, the colors chilled upon the sky. But within the house the hearts of great fires opened like yellow blossoms, and restless thoughts, as if they had been summer birds, took shelter by them. Myrtle came, and Reliance welcomed her; and the two ladies pursued, each in her own fashion, the broken-winged ideal of a home. Myrtle was ailing a little; this was partly the effect of too much society, and partly too much sister-in-law; she was glad to be quiet, to have her own way, practice when she felt like it without disturbing babies, and read a good novel of an evening. She fitted with as little jar as was possible to the habits of Mrs. Strong's family. Reliance herself returned with more or less spasmodic success to the philanthropic labors which her mother's ill-

ness and death had interrupted. The continuity of her work was interfered with somewhat by business cares consequent upon the settlement of the estate, in which Nordhall's assistance was freely offered and necessarily accepted. This threw them a good deal together, more than Nordhall had intended should be the case. Sometimes she would look up and say, "Am I a burden to you?"

Then, taking but a moment to subdue the mad motion of his heart, he would tell her gently, No; she knew better. And then she would look at him gratefully, and think *how* gentle he was this winter, how controlled and calm, how free from that old impulsive way of his, — liable to break out, one never knew when, into gusts of feeling one never understood. Reliance was aware of a change of climate in him. He was more equable. He commanded strength. He had repose. She thought this a tribute to her affliction, and thanked him in her heart. It seemed as if no need of hers arose which this kind friend did not know how to meet. All her bruised youth, shorn of its joy and ruined of its natural atmosphere, leaned upon him.

There is no plot to this story. It is the tale of of a not unusual life, and usual life is not plotted against by its Director. Planned we find it, in an always careful, often mysterious, and sometimes intricate sense of the word. Yet there are not apt to be elements of surprise in the histories of women like Reliance Strong, more abrupt than those which lie compressed within their own natures, and in the natures which they chemically attract or repel.

There is no plot, I say, to this history, but it was perhaps a part of its plan that before that uneventful winter was over, Mr. Griggs should be found one night in the streets of Salem as drunk as a "reformed man" could well be.

This took place on an arctic February day, and it was not till the decline of one of the bitterest evenings of the season that Mrs. Strong was made acquainted with the fact. It was Janet's "evening out," and by means of the united protection of Jacobs and that pretty blue veil which crossed behind, she had managed to get over the marshes and home to see her mother and the eleven little Griggses who fed and shared the sisterly sentiment in Janet's heart. Poor little Janet! It is not perhaps so small a bereavement to lose an

"evening out" that we need scorn her for the consciousness of weak disappointment that lurked within her sense of grave affliction. For it is true that there were wondrous minstrels in Salem that night, of whom Jacobs, having seen the world, had complimentary opinions which doubtless would insure any performers a house; and one calls to see one's mother on the way purely as a piece of supererogatory virtue which it was incredible that Providence should punish. It seemed hard to Janet for a moment that her father could not have chosen any other night in the year to get drunk on. But she turned her back on Satan (with whom she bade Jacobs keep his appointment), and loyally returned to her mistress with one of her father's "reformed" friends and the serious news.

Mr. Griggs had been drugged. He had been guilty of the grave imprudence of taking a cup of tea from another man's hand. The day was cold; the tea was hot; Mr. Griggs shivered, trusted, and was betrayed. He was now making wildly from groggery to groggery along the streets of Salem, as insane as any man in Bedlam, and as innocent as any out of it. This was the testimony of the honest fellow whom Janet brought with

her (he had the affecting name of Babbs), and it was testimony which Mrs. Strong felt no inclination to doubt. Such deeds come too frequently within the knowledge of those who interest themselves in this especial phase of humanitarian ef fort, to excite surprise. One learns to observe them with something of the acceptance given to the stab of the bayonet or the groan of the dying by the spectator at a battle.

"We 've sent a committee to watch him," said Mr. Babbs. "We 've been on his tracks ever since he left the house. It was one of that lot up at Cranby's did it. He did it on a bet, and that 's the holy truth and right of the case, ma'am, and there 's none of us can't manage him, not his wife nor none; and if he *ain't* got home he 'll drink himself dead before to-morrow noon. There 's that danger when they 've sworn off so long, and break sudden. And one of the men said, says he, 'I wish the Lady knew it; *she'd* manage him," says he; 'I wish the Lady knew.' "

The Lady had never been called upon in an emergency like this before; though she was acquainted with women who had, and to whom the inside of drinking-hells was as familiar and as sacred ground as the locked rooms where they went

to say their prayers in their own homes, with their children's voices in their ears. She hesitated an instant, then scorned herself for her hesitation; went up and told Myrtle that some of her poor people were in trouble, ordered the carriage, took Mr. Babbs and Janet and Kaiser into it, and got quietly away as soon as she could. She a little expected Nordhall that evening, and she neither chose to argue the case against him, nor to be seen in his company among those men. Her instinct shrank from that. She would go with such protectors as were natural to the extremity, do her duty as God aided her, and get home again as safe and as soon as he permitted.

She managed as wisely as she could. Janet had filled the carriage with half the wraps in the house, and they made such haste as the case admitted of. But it soon became necessary to leave the carriage.

"I would n't resk kerridge-folks about these parts," said Mr. Babbs. "There might be — followin'. I 'd ask your driver to wait here."

Thus it fell out that they walked the length of the dreadful street in the wind. Reliance was scarcely conscious of a chill, and the whole thing did not take fifteen minutes. She kept her hand

on Kaiser's head, but was not frightened. She was intensely excited by the sickening scenes through which she passed, by the responsibility of her errand, and by the deadly cold itself. Mr. Babbs walked a little in advance of them; the two women followed him in perfect silence; he glancing in at sights from which he shielded them, passing from saloon-door to saloon-door, with that trained scent for his man which the recovered drunkard possesses, and which may be either a specimen of profound detective's work or of superb Christian enthusiasm. In this good fellow's case it was a little of both.

"There!" he said at last, below his breath. And the Lady, like a private at Balaklava, followed him in. Kaiser moved a pace or two, and preceded her.

Poor Griggs stood in the middle of the place, a maniac and melancholy sight. There were other men, but Reliance forgot the men. She stepped in like a spirit; she was as pale, and seemed to shine. It was all done in a minute. It seemed to her afterwards a very simple thing to do; not at all heroic, or dangerous, or dreadful. She only put her ungloved hand upon his arm, and said in her distinct, "pure womanly," voice, —

"Your daughter and I are here. We will take you home. Shall we come now? I think I would, if I were you," she added clearly (for the crazed creature hesitated), in the dead silence which had fallen upon the men and upon all the place.

He obeyed her. She thought he would. It was all over; they got him to the carriage, and so home to his wife and babies. There he fell into delirium tremens.

Only the Lady could control him at first; so, as was natural, having sent word home to Myrtle, and a messenger for Dr. Bishop, who was out of town, she stayed.

At five in the morning, with the thermometer below zero, without food, without sleep, she got out into the deathly cold again, and so home and to bed.

She did not leave it for many weeks. Dr. Bishop did not diagnose the case with his usual decision; though Myrtle, with that readiness of scientific conviction characteristic of the laity, pronounced it neuralgia of the heart. There seemed to be a mysterious surrender of life's forces, — a surrender to sheer excitement, cold, and care.

XIV.

"If it could be — Oh, all in vain!
The restless trouble of my soul
Sets, like the great tide to the moon,
Toward your control."

RELIANCE herself did not talk, nor ask what was the matter. She knew that she was rather sick, but the indifference of her condition was on her young frame. It seemed equally easy to live or to die. Myrtle hung over her without one rebuke. Nobody mentioned Mr. Griggs or the temperance work. Nobody scolded her. And nobody knew that she had found out from Janet that he was doing well, and that it was all worth while. She yielded herself to the novelty of disease, and was ill with all her might for a while.

There were always flowers in the room during this illness; unobtrusive flowers, not too heavily-scented, — mignonnette, small rosebuds, pansies, — quiet things that did not assert themselves to invalid perceptions; only ivy leaves sometimes, and ferns often. No message came with these

softly-appealing thoughts, and she did not ask whose they were.

As she grew better she found reasons for deferring a meeting with Nordhall. She could not have told why. An instinct or a presentiment possessed her. She feared him. She did not go down till days after she was able. She was not strong enough to understand how cruel she was.

But one day, finding herself out of excuses for playing the invalid any longer, she unexpectedly came down-stairs, and stayed all the afternoon. She had her first tea in the little library (which was warmest), where the ebony desk was, and the one window. Myrtle and Janet had brightened up the dull place. Cushions and color were in it, the open fire and the tea-tray on a crimson cloth, and Reliance lay on the old sofa, and looked about peacefully. After all, it was pleasant to be alive. She drank her tea, and felt of her own warm hand.

She was lying there all alone, for Myrtle had gone to her own supper, as Reliance preferred, — alone, and very quiet and forgetful of all the world, — when he (for he would be deferred no longer) came in. He had his hat in his hand, and flowers. He laid them both down for they shook.

He came and stood by the sofa. Neither could speak. She had not looked at him. She was afraid, and she knew she was afraid.

"But I saved my man!" she cried suddenly, lifting her eyes, as men bare the neck to the axe.

"You saved one man, — yes. You have almost killed another."

She felt, as she lay looking up at him, that this was simply true. The whole man looked shrunken and old; his cheek as thin, almost, as hers.

He stood leaning over her. It seemed to be enough for him to look at her. She covered her face with both her hands; not passionately, but with a deprecating motion, as if she appealed to him to spare her.

He did spare her, moved as he was. He stirred, walked about the room, found a vase for his flowers, occupied himself, and gave her time. Then he came back, and sat down close beside her sofa and without speaking lifted one of her hands, and laid it gently down again, with that air of relinquishing what was precious which he could not control when he touched her, because he did not know that he had it.

"It was a good while," he said at last, "not to be able to see you, — not to know" —

"Ah, but you know *now!*" she faltered.

"Yes, *I know now*," repeated Nordhall, with an emphasis which escaped her.

"And Dr. Bishop says" —

"*Dr. Bishop*" — began Nordhall, but choked his own words back.

"Have you been jealous of the poor doctor *again?*" she cried, breaking into an unexpected little laugh. This laugh changed the aspect of the scene, somewhat, for these two nervous, overwrought people. When she saw him smile, Reliance drew her breath, and began to be less afraid of him. With the perverseness of her sex, however, she struck out once more for her balance.

"We had some lovely talks, while I was getting better. You can't think how I enjoyed them."

"What did you talk about?"

He would not groan and he could not smile.

"Oh, protoplasm, and homœopathy, and — let me see! — bilious affections! All sorts of delightful things."

"Well, I can't help it," said Nordhall, in a patient way. "I can't help anything," he added, with the inanity or insanity of feeling too long a prisoner, now a beating rebel at his lips. "May I just sit and look at you?" he continued, after a gentle pause. "That is all I 'll ask."

Now Reliance felt more afraid of his gentleness than she did of anything else. He might be jealous, he might be angry, he might be cross, or cold, or whatever he chose; she would rather he did not speak like this. Once again her eyes said, Spare me!

But this time he did not spare.

That little library was mercilessly bright. All the color, all the flame and flash and fever of it, deepened slowly in the habitually grave place, like conscious and cruel desires in a mind unused to them. Each coal in the grate became a watchful eye. The walls looked on, aware. It was as if the whole room were a lover. Reliance could have leaped from it.

"It 's of no use," said Nordhall, suddenly overcome by the groan which he could not command. "I know I might have the grace to be still a little longer, — and you so feeble yet. But I can't do it. I can't stand it; I can't *bear* any more. It is of no use pretending any longer, Reliance Strong. It is not friendship, and I won't lie about it another living day. It is not friendship, and I know it. It is not friendship, and you shall know it, too!"

"But if I know it *is?* If I say it *is?*

All her beauty seemed to yearn over him, while it defied him. She pitied him, she was fond of him, she needed him (and oh, yes, she feared him!); but she warned, she would protect, she would save, him.

"*Don't* go on! Don't say any more to-night! Wait and think" —

"I have done enough of that," said Nordhall, in a dull way. "I have loved you — I have *known* that I did — ever since we were in Bethlehem. I did not mean to tell you. I kept it to myself all winter. But when you got so sick," — the tempest of his feeling rose upon him now, — "and I could n't get to you; it was not proper for me to go up, though you died there, — you at the head of the stairs and I at the foot — Good God! there are no rights of any sort to this sham we 've called friendship, — no rights, no place, no name, no power! I trample on it, I disown the thing! I will have none of its lies and traps! I am *not* content to be your friend! You are a woman and I am a man, and I love you!"

The tempest of his passion was upon them; Reliance bowed her head before it, — lower now beneath his silence than beneath his cry.

"O my darling!" he said softly, "I am sorry for you."

The noble fellow had forgotten at that moment that he suffered; to witness her pain was his self-annihilation.

When she had come in some measure to herself, she said in a tone where pity and reproach went struggling, —

"You have forgotten John!"

"*Forgotten* John? Your husband has been dead a long while, Mrs. Strong. I've served for this hour with almost a seven years' silence. Don't be more cruel than you can help. *Forgotten* John!"

"Oh, I didn't mean forgotten!" she wailed incoherently. And then, for she was weak and sore bestead, and did not know what to do or what to say, but only what to think, and only to think that they were both miserable, she buried her face in the pillows, and cried as if her heart would break.

He made no effort to check or comfort her. He was too conscious of needing strength to be able to expend any. He leaned back in his chair and watched her in a wretched way. All he could think was that he had ruined their happiness, and that he could not have helped it and should do it

again and was glad he had. A dull delight in having the truth out, possessed him.

"You 'll hurt yourself crying," he said at last, stolidly, "and it will be my fault. Everything will be my fault," he added, for she had not answered him.

"Oh, no! Oh, no, no, no!" Reliance came up from her tears like a flower from a storm, and was a woman again, and took the man into her management. "Oh, don't blame yourself so! — I can't bear *that*. Don't talk about your fault."

"Whose fault shall I talk about? Tell me!"

"Mine — a little."

"I do not understand you."

"Oh, because I might — I ought — Dear Mr. Nordhall, I think perhaps I *ought* to have known! I did n't!" she added, in a quick, ringing, honest voice.

"I know you did n't. You *could n't*."

"I never had any other friend, — not a friend like you, I mean; one I leaned on, and who helped me and was a comfort. I never had any other, except my husband," she said simply. "I did not know about such things. I thought a man and woman could be — could have — Oh, it is all over!" she cried with sudden piteousness.

"I thought a friendship like ours was one of the noblest things I ever heard of. I thought you one of the noblest men!"

Nordhall's whole soul quivered under this appeal, as the Alpine climber may quiver on the narrow ledge of ice to which one false step has hurled him. Height is above him, — cold, cruel, white, and lost. Depth is below him, — the glacier's. He cannot climb. He will not fall. He clings to an icicle, which imperceptibly melts.

"And now you will think me one of the — no, not one of the worst!" he cried, with grand eyes. "You can never think I have not tried to spare you, tried to be what you needed, to be true in God's sight and yours — and your husband's. And I'm glad I told you what I have to-night, even though it makes you miserable (poor girl, poor girl!), and I would give my life to make you happy. At least it was *honest* to tell you. I never played a part about any matter before this winter. It has worn me out. The whole world might know every thought I have had about you, and yet I have felt guilty. I am glad it's over, — though it has spoiled everything, as you say."

They looked at one another compassionately.

Each seemed to be appealing to the other for help neither knew how to give, or to withhold.

"Now the mischief is done," he said, "I want it done thoroughly. We will have no more concealment, half-thoughts, after-thoughts, and doubts about this matter. Understand me, Mrs. Strong. I have not lightly yielded to — a light emotion. I have made it the purpose of my life for all these years to be loyal to my dead friend, and, if possible, to make his poor wife happy, — have I not? Answer me, dear! Have I, or have I not?"

"Oh, you have!"

"In this purpose I have failed at last. I am not a dead man, unfortunately. I am alive, and I love you."

"Poor fellow!" she said, as if she had been speaking not to him, but about him.

"I want you to understand," he went on, with gathering patience, "I want you to know, that I have fought against it till there's no more fight left in me. I am beaten. I never meant to love you in *that* way. I love you in just that way."

"Oh, hush! hush!"

"No," he said firmly and gently, "I shall not hush. The time is past for that. You must hear me out."

"I cannot," she moaned; "*I cannot* hear you now."

"Why not now? When will there be a better time?"

"Oh, there need never be any time. I don't want to hear it at all. It is bad enough to understand it. It is bad enough to know that we can never be happy again. It is all spoiled. There is no way" —

"Yes," he interrupted hoarsely, "there is a way" —

She raised her left hand with a gesture full of dignity, pathos, and entreaty. He respected it, like the gentleman he was.

"I have tired you," he said. "Forgive me, and let me go."

If she had anything to say, she had not said it. If she had need of him, the room was empty. The fire was falling. The great glow on the walls had sunk. The listening room turned a cold eye upon her. She felt unprotected and exposed. She felt as if the whole world were searching her heart to its lowest deep.

Well, it might; the whole round, wise world might know — and welcome to it! — everything there was to know. She had not coquetted with

this good man; nor, what was quite as definite and important a moral fact, had she consciously coquetted with her own soul.

Myrtle came, and Janet, and Kaiser, who was suspicious and jealous to the last degree; and they fanned the dying fire, which fluttered and throbbed into flame. To Reliance, lying there, with her weak body and wild brain, this revival of color and warmth was incredibly strengthening. In her excitement, the fitful, moody room seemed to blossom about her like one of those June lilies that her husband used to love.

"Shall I play to you?" asked Myrtle, whose good nature always outweighed her perspicacity. Reliance hesitated, turning her feverish cheek towards this other woman, helplessly.

"I will sing," said Myrtle; "that will be better. You need diversion and rest."

Myrtle had one alto song. It was written for her by a German music-master she once had, and carefully adapted to her voice. (It was one of the undesirable traits of her sister-in-law that she never recovered from the conviction that there had been tender passages between Myrtle and that music-master.) Myrtle lowered the gas, and in the half-lit room, to a low, irregular melody, began: —

"We sail a sea without a shore,
I on the one side, thou on the other.
(Oh, for a breath of the pine and clover!)
What if the tempest crouch and roar?
Heart unto heart like a wave goes over.
For we love with a love that is more and more,
Child and mother,
Brother and brother,
Wife and lover,
Love as they may,
Love as they will,
We are not as they.
For the sea has no shore,
No shore, no shore,
(Oh, for a breath of the pine and the clover!)
And the breaker is never still.
Hands may not clasp, when the soul is a rover,
Only heart unto heart goes over."

XV.

> "Sir, fare you well;
> Hereafter, in a better world than this,
> I shall desire more love and knowledge of you."
>
> As You Like It.

It is not easy to say which of these two people felt more keenly, now, the form of bondage to which their acquaintane had reduced them.

The woman, perceiving their mutual subjection as clearly as the man, without the man's consciousness of either its danger or its delight, was more perplexed, and, in her way, no less pained.

It seemed to Reliance that the sun stood still in mid-heaven of her little world. Nothing could happen after this. The worst was. All laws and precedents of action had failed her. A man who would not remain her friend, and must not become her lover, had no place in a woman's life. Yet he had taught and wrought upon that life till it clung to his own with a tenacity terribly like tenderness, and a dependence less dreadful only than that of love.

A selfish anger with him for what he inflicted upon her, alternated sharply with her womanly pity for what she must inflict on him. At times, she thought she would write and bid him stay away from her forever. It seemed as if she could never look upon his face again.

For a few days she kept her room, and lost strength.

Nordhall had not called again.

On the fourth day, she began to think that he had perhaps accepted the finality of her treatment of himself, and simply forestalled any necessity upon her part for dispensing with his acquaintance. She remembered that he had undeniably the right to do this. She remembered that a man would sometimes stand upon his rights.

She got up that afternoon, dressed, and tried to go out; but drove only half a mile or so, said she was chilled through, came home, and crept to the library fire. After breathing warmth a little, she asked for her visitors' book, and pored over her list of poor people for a time. Mr. Griggs called while she was thus occupied. She received him for a few minutes, but it made her very faint to talk. She had to let the poor man go. She comforted herself by sending Myrtle to the Mission

with him, with a view to discovering the exact merits of the last disagreement in the temperance society, which threatened to rend that warlike organization to its foundation; and then, when Myrtle was gone, she lay still and wondered when she would be quite strong, and able to be of use to anybody again. She tried not to mind it. She would not have thought it could be so hard to live an unshared life. She would not have thought it had meant so much to her, all these years, that there was any one person more than any other to whom all that she did was of supreme importance because she did it, and every care, or wish, or thought of hers a matter of strong interest because it was her own. She would not have thought it could require so much courage to begin all over again, quite alone, a lonely life at best, and now spoiled with a feeling that had no name, nor place, nor right in the world; spent by a dependence cruel in proportion as it was falsely calculated, weakened by leaning against a support weaker than herself.

"Why do you cry?"

She drew one great breath, but did not uncover her face. She was lying crushed down among the pillows, almost as he had left her that last

time. It was as if she and her mood had not advanced or altered all these days. But the man had undergone a change. His first accent vibrated with it.

"Tell me, Reliance, what do you cry for? There, — I will sit down and wait till you can speak."

"You need not wait, sir; I am *not* crying!"

"No? Well, never mind. I hoped you were. *I* should cry in your place."

"Cry, then, if you want to!" said she petulantly. "*I* got through with that the other evening."

She sat up against the crimson pillows, brilliant in her white shawls. There was splendid color on her cheeks. At first he could only sit and look at her. Then he remembered that he had not come there to admire her beauty, nor to dry her tears, relieve her solitude, endure her sweet caprices, submit to her velvet tyrannies. No more of that now. Nordhall, too, had spent these four days in reflection more compelling than emotion, and emotion clearer than reflection. His next step was as distinct to him as his next breath. All his moral atmosphere (he would have said) had cleared. He knew now, or he

thought he knew, or he wished to think he knew, what it was right for him to do. Oh, she was a woman! Let her be as velvet as she would, — keep him back by the giant strength of gentleness. His love was iron. He was a man. Silken thread and metal fibre should have it out.

He drew a chair beside her, selecting the one he wanted with deliberate calm, and they resumed for a few moments almost the identical positions of that other evening. Reliance, however, sat up with more strength against the pillows, and after a short time slipped her feet from the lounge to the floor.

"You had better lie still," he said, with some authority. "You are still weak. Very well, then. If you won't, I will bring a cricket or something. I want you to be comfortable, for I am going to talk with you."

"I am quite comfortable, thank you," she said, stiffly. He paid no attention to this little gust, but brought the cricket, and she put her feet upon it, and he sat down again.

"I have been thinking," he began, as if they were resuming a conversation but a moment since interrupted by a slight accident, — "I have been thinking what we had better do."

"I don't see that there is anything to do," replied Reliance, drearily.

"On the contrary, something must be done. This cannot go on — as it is."

Her heart gave one bound; then seemed to sink, and sink, and sink, as if it were a life leaping from a precipice.

"You *see* that, do you?"

"Why, of course I see" —

"Excuse me; you do not see it. A woman is so blind at such a time, — *you* are, I mean. I don't know about other women. Confess you are a little glad I don't. Yes, you are, poor girl! After all, you *do* care for me a little."

"I care more than a little," said Reliance, with quickening breath; "you know I care, — have always cared — a great deal. . . . . You are cruel to me!" she blazed, unexpectedly.

Perhaps she would not have said it if she had seen the expression that overswept his responsive face. Perhaps she would not have said it if she had not expected to be contradicted. He did not contradict her. He passed the outbreak by, as if it were the passion of a child; only gave a slight motion of the hand, as if he put something from him. The whole man now strode steadily to his purpose.

"What I want to say is this: We have tried Platonic friendship a long while, and must admit that we have made a failure of it. It means different things to both of us, but it means something to each. You will grant as much as this?"

She nodded, with melancholy eyes.

"It does n't work," went on the man simply, "and I want the right to see if something else cannot be made to. That is what I have come to say."

"I do not understand you, Mr. Nordhall."

"I think you *do*. Excuse me. But I will be plainer. We are neither of us very happy. Let us be patient with each other. Listen to me a minute, while I explain it all a little more clearly. There is this difference between us: you are sad because you want friendship; I am mad because I want *you*."

She did not cry out, nor protest, as he perhaps had expected. He leaned back in his chair, brought his lips together grimly, and watched her. It was a good while before she spoke, and then it was without indignation or excitement, in an inexpressibly sad and patient tone.

"It seems as if it must be, somehow, my fault that I can have come to this; that I can sit here

and listen while you say such things. It is so *dreadful!*"

"I can't see why," said Nordhall.

"No, you can't; you are a man. Oh, I wish I had died before it came to this!" she added, desolately.

"You can't die," he said, with imperious brusqueness. "You 've got to live. It is natural to live."

"It is not natural to be so miserable!"

"Then give me the right to try and make you happy."

"A woman can give that right but once." She had risen now, and spoke in a rich, resonant voice.

He had to look up to her as he pleaded with her: —

"Some women do, — think how many! Why, Reliance, it is no sin to be happy, a second time. Listen to me! I 'm not as selfish as I seem. I know it would be better for you. *I know* I could make you happy!"

Her lip quivered like a rose-leaf blown by the wind; but her splendid eyes shone down without one shade. They blinded him, they were so clear.

"I tried to be loyal to John!" he cried. He felt compelled to defend himself, as if before an invisible and awful tribunal.

"We will not talk about my husband, if you please." She lifted her head, and turned from him, swaying slightly in the bright, warm air, as if she leaned against unseen support. "That is all over now. You did the best you could; I do not blame you. But I can never talk about him any more, with *you*."

He would have been of a far less delicate texture than he was, had he not experienced a slight shock of regret at this, and something akin to shame. His ardent face fell.

"I was comforted by your help and strength," proceeded Reliance, in that low, firm voice of hers, which he was familiar with when *she* had the mastery of their mutual mood. "I was grateful for your friendship all this while. Why should I not say it? I wanted you, — I *want* you for my friend."

"And I want you for my wife," he said, doggedly. "Why should I not say *that?*"

With this, he sprang to his feet, and stood facing her poised height in a manly rage. She grew pale a little, but did not flinch. Only a breath of

the sheltered, fire-lit air separated them. Twilight was stealing on. Out in the garden, the shadows on the snow had turned to a fixed and resolute blue. Nordhall stretched out his hands. He stood there like a cry of outraged and omnipotent nature, and she like an inexorable moral law.

She shook her head.

"And yet," he cried, "you love me!"

"I am fond of you. That is not love."

"I will be content with your fondness!"

"*You* content with my— Now you are wandering. Now you are not sane. If I could wrong myself, Charles Nordhall, I would not so wrong you, in the sight of God!"

"God knows I should be a blessed man to be so wronged."

"It would be a wicked thing!"

"I am ready to bear the blame of such a wickedness."

"But *you* can't be right for *me*. Oh, don't let us talk so any longer! Don't torment me! Don't make it any harder . . . . than it must be" . . . .

She hid her face in both her hands upon the high top of the carved chair. Nordhall stood so near that he fancied he could hear the agitated

beating of her heart. The imperfect light had lessened. Only a breath of darkness now stood sentinel between them. His arms leaned towards her yielding attitude, as the wave leans to the shore, the fire to the sun, the river to the sea. That which was natural seemed that which was right. God made it. What was a frail creature like this, that she should set a nature against a nature, create a right above a right?

"Oh, come!" he pleaded; "it is natural to be happy."

In the dividing dark, she raised her head.

"It is natural to be true!" she cried. "Charles Nordhall, it is natural for a woman to be true. I beg you to leave me to myself. I ask you to respect what you cannot understand. I have only this one thing to guide me, ... that I loved my husband. I do not love you like *that*. I am lonely; but loneliness is not love. I want to do the right and noble thing; it is not right to marry when one does not altogether love. That is not a good and beautiful marriage. I don't know about you men, but *we* are not like that. We should be sorry; there would be always something beyond, something lost. It seems to me as if I should do a wrong to all the world. I want

to do . . . . I am trying to be . . . . the best and truest, right thing. It must be possible to find the right, — not to be mistaken. You should not hinder me. That is not noble in you."

His outstretched, empty arms fell back. Across that inch or two of dividing dark he could no more have touched her now than across the great gulf fixed. It seemed to him that if he did, he should touch a dead man's hand. She had awful protection.

He had to do something, for they heard Myrtle ringing at the great front door. He had to speak, and so he said, hoarsely and hurriedly, without extending his hand, —

"I 'll do the best I can. I won't desert you because of this, if I can manage it. But don't exact too much of me."

"I have no right to exact anything," she interrupted, humbly.

"Don't *expect* too much of me, then. I 'll see what I can do. But you 're on a level I can't reach."

"I hope" — began the woman, with a little womanly wistfulness. She hoped he would reverence that level, and her for being there. She would have felt stronger to know that he did.

But that was not a thing to be said. She checked herself.

He did not finish her sentence for her, nor answer it. It was true that he solemnly revered her for the high, fine quality of her denial. It was true that he knew her to be a nobler woman than if she had "mistaken loneliness for love." It was true that he the more passionately worshiped her for the loyalty of soul which separated her from himself. But it was not in man nature to tell her so. If his idol had stepped from its pedestal, it would have crept into his arms.

He felt that her reply was final, and that it was for her, at least, the best solution of their difficulties. Just then, he could not have urged one small, selfish pang against a decision with which the strongest in himself took sides, despite the treason of his weakest. He bowed his head before it.

He wished he had been braver. He wished he had never told her. He was like one to whom the secret of select heroism has whispered itself, and then recoiled, leaving him with a sense of having betrayed a tender and terrible confidence.

XVI.

"But give the Past — 't is all thou canst — thy tears!"

J. T. FIELDS.

AND yet, so torn was he by the irresolutions and contradictions of his feeling that after he had left her, and had got alone into the red library that day, he wrote her a note, which he mailed without giving himself time for that repentance sure to overtake the prudent man who commits an impulse to paper. In this letter he said: —

MY DEAR FRIEND, — I cannot say I do not respect your decision, for I do; nor that I do not revere you for it, for I do. But alas! to increase reverence for what we love is not to ease or lessen love. I love you: this is my extenuation. If you would, you could love me: this is my argument.

The more I think of it, away from you and from the influence of your firm purpose, the more I am led to ask whether there is not another side

to the lofty code by which you desire to regulate your life. Life is long and lonely, and you are young and alone. I do not say this to influence your judgment through your feeling, but rather your feeling through your judgment. Indeed, honestly, I cannot own that I say it with any profound hope of influencing you at all. Life is hard and exacting, and it has already exacted a good deal of you. If a happiness, real, however imperfect, and trustworthy, however insufficient, is possible to you, is it not *good sense* to accept it?

I 'm a plain fellow, without romantic ideas of conduct, and sometimes the plain sense of a thing comes uppermost to me, not with the pressure of a mood, but with the force of nature.

And yet I want to do right. I don't want to profane a sacrament (I 'm not too plain to believe in sacraments) for the sake of mere human happiness. Above all things, I want *you* to do right. I know that I am writing a contradictory, useless sort of note. But what I am trying to get at is, whether the good sense of a matter *is* no guide to the *right* of a matter.

Will you tell me how it strikes you?

I am, in denial or delight, your faithful friend,

CHARLES NORDHALL.

To that letter he received in a few days this brief reply: —

DEAR FRIEND, — It seems to me that the goodness of a thing *is* the good sense of it.

If I thought I cared for you in the way to make what you ask right, I suppose it would be the most sensible thing to do. Even then, I am not sure that the happiness you think of would come, or could come, to you and me. Does it matter so much whether one is happy? If only one is true, I think that is best.

And yet I would rather you did not think me very happy, in causing you so deep a pain. Ever sincerely your friend, RELIANCE STRONG.

P. S. I do not think we had better write or talk of these matters any more.

He took her at her word, with this, and urged her no more.

They sought, with such imperfect success as was possible, to return to their former relations. Nordhall was manly and brave about that. He had distinctly made up his mind that he would not deprive her of a friend because he could not win her for a wife. As long as he could bear it, she

should not miss anything he could be or give to her. Women and men lived gladder, fuller, nobler lives for each other's mutual support. It ought to be possible to render that support, even staggering under a burden such as his shoulders were doomed to bear. Perhaps none but he who loved and could not win, was capable of that devotion sifted of self, that high help and calm comfort, which only a wise and controlled masculine friendship can wrap about a woman's life.

As for himself, he chose the crumbs fallen from that dear, denying life, sweeter to him and richer than the feast of a goddess with her god.

This was *his* way of being true.

The supreme opportunity comes to each of us once. It may be in the surrender of a joy, in the renunciation of a love, in the acceptance of a daily burden almost too petty to rank among the heroisms, in the resistance of an obscure temptation striking to the roots of character, in the endurance of infliction whose subtlest blow aims at the very brain and marrow of enduring will, perhaps in the laying down of life itself, — but it comes once only.

The angel with averted face broods over us for that moment, and passes on. It remains with

ourselves to dream of that unseen countenance, whether as the spectre or the seraph of our lives.

The patient pursuance of a high ideal is the crucial test of nature; desperately to miss it may be the final discipline of character.

Do you tell me this is a hard saying? He that hath ears to hear what passes on "the other side of silence," let him hear.

Reliance Strong's was no analytic mind, and she did not reflect upon ideals; she only served them. She was a gentle woman, whose instinct knew love from loneliness, and whose conscience wished to separate right and wrong.

After the conclusive scene between herself and Nordhall, she took up her life again, with perplexity in her brave brown eyes. She did not grow strong, or, if so, very slowly; and her spirits suffered with her suffering nerve. She was not able to carry on her benevolent work, and this gave her idle and depressed hours.

She was sorry and puzzled that Nordhall still retained such a grasp upon her daily thoughts. She did not wish to forget him, but she would have preferred to make an effort to remember him. She had to learn how inexorable is the

twining of any two human lives; and that the dismembership of ties far lighter than the sincere and harmonious ones which had subsisted so long between herself and her friend, is a process which can no more be hastened than the healing of a torn tendril, and no more be reasoned with, than the quiver of the star-fish wrenched from the rock.

In this case, naturally, matters were not helped by the rock. Rock-like, Nordhall stayed by her. There was granite in his love. There was crystal in his unselfishness. She despised herself for leaning against a support she had arbitrarily refused. She did not know which to pity more, herself or him. His fidelity and devotion made a species of slavery in her life, against which it seemed dishonorable to rebel. The inevitable awkwardness and consciousness of their present position towards each other overwhelmed her, now with a shallow sense of nervous irritation, now with a deep tide, half emotion, half reflection, like a dull despair.

This friendship, which had ruled her for so many years, could not abdicate without anarchy. It was not as if it had been a light experience, flexibly yielded to; a gust of feeling, born of rare circumstance, or of morbid solitude, ill health, or

any of the conditions which create easy emotions in unobservant natures without fixed ideals. Reliance had been a cheerful, active woman, and, up to this time, a well one. Soul and body drew healthy breath. She knew not where to look for a substitute for a feeling which had been so happy, so natural, so calm, so free from remorses or reproaches, but which, after this, could never become anything in which a woman of self-possession and sense could take womanly refuge. He might protest as he would, he might serve her unselfishly and heroically as he could. She knew that their golden age was over. She knew that they could never take comfort in each other any more. She battled with this knowledge. She withdrew into those experiences of which no woman's lip can speak. She sat like Penelope in her bower, and raveled by night the web she wove by day.

There was something terrible to her in the urgency of Nordhall's image. All other problems seemed to fold their hands and wait till this one thing was settled. All other people seemed, for the time, to slip out of her life. Only she and he were in the world. Like the hero and heroine of the drama, like the victor and the rival of a race,

they saw the supernumeraries melt from the un real stage, the racers grow specks in the distant dust.

Winter relented, and the reluctant New England spring looked in over the bare syringa bushes and red-brown horse-chestnut buds.

Reliance grew better, and worse again. She sent for Dr. Bishop, who was uncommonly busy, and returned word that he would come the first day he could. When he called, at last, he was absorbed in two deadly cases of diphtheria and a remarkable and interesting piece of surgery, — something about a boy who was cut open and lived without brains. Reliance listened impatiently to this cheerful story. It did not seem to her at all surprising that people could live without brains. Apparently life could go on without other vital conditions. She passionately objected to these men to whom a cut skull was more real than a cut soul. Only the stolid assurance that he could not possibly understand her, prevented her from telling Dr. Bishop what she thought of him; he would call her hysterical, for her pains, being none the wiser, and herself the weaker, for the spasm of revolt.

She listened, therefore, in absolute silence, when

he told her that he could find nothing the matter with her, advised a little Peruvian bark, and a trip to Washington, — and went back to his dreadful boy.

It did not help matters much, that the physician sent her a scientifically short note that evening, in which he said: —

DEAR MRS. STRONG, — I was sorry to seem unsympathetic to-day, but I was driven to death. Had I been able to command "all the time there is," like the Indian, what could I have done for you? You have no physical ailment. I am not a physician of the soul. I see nothing for you but to work out your own cure. Truly yours,

E. F. BISHOP.

This humiliated without helping her. She tore the note, denounced science, and went and sat, uncomprehended, with Myrtle. She would have sat with Janet, just then, for sheer human companionship. Myrtle, too, was going to desert her. She had to return to her brother's by and by, where a sick (if undesirable) sister-in-law and a very new baby created duties "nearer," as the phrase goes, than these in the young widow's lonely, and now ailing and less cheerful, home.

It occurred bitterly to Reliance that she had no claim on anybody anywhere in a world full of shared sorrows and united joys.

She resolutely gathered her heart together, and crept out among her poor people. But for these most intense forms of human sympathy and exertion, a frame of iron should inclose a soul of sunshine.

Mr. Griggs came to her house, one day, and respectfully, but urgently, said, —

"It ain't my business to look after you, but I 'm free to say somebody had ought to. I don't speak for nobody but myself; but it seems to *me* you 're sick. You 're tired all the time, and you 've got a cough, and you can't do for us folks at the Mission like you used. I don't wish to be bold nor for'ard, but I know you took care and trouble on my account, — I can't help knowin'. Now I don't want you to take no more till you 're different to what you are now. Mrs. Strong, if you 'll go away somewhere, — among folks that ain't poor and don't drink, — and try to get better, I 'll tell you what I 'll do. I 'll reform myself without you! I 'll reform myself and every live man I can get hold on, from Cranby's to the sea! I will, so help me God!" cried the "redeemed

man," drawing himself up. "I 've got it in me to do a sight of that sort of thing I 've never put my shoulder to, yet. Mebbe I 've depended too much on you, — on a lady — on a lady's help," said Mr. Griggs, gently; "*and she 's nothing but a woman, after all!* And I 'm a strong, well man! I 'd ought to take care of myself, and help her along, too. Mrs. Strong, if you 'll be so good as to trust me, *I 'll* look after the meetins and the fellows while you 're gone, and we 'll pray for you — every meetin'," added Mr. Griggs, conclusively. The tears were in his eyes. His rough hand shook. Reliance was greatly touched. She was in that unreasonable, but highly sensitive mood, when we are most ready to give a pledge to the person that has the least right to ask it. She told Mr. Griggs that, if he would feel any better about it, she would go away; she would travel somewhere, and get well enough to come back to anybody that needed her.

"And I 'm glad you said you would pray for me; I shall like to think of that. *I* need help, too, Mr. Griggs," she said, in her wistful voice, "as much as the poor men. We all need one another in this hard world."

Hers was at this time that inharmonious rela-

tion of soul and body, when to take a resolution is to take the first step in recovery. She thrived upon her promise to Mr. Griggs, impulsively given, but honorably kept, and laid her plans with a great access of courage for what we used to call a change of scene, but now designate as a difference of environment.

As soon as Myrtle went she would close the house, give Janet a vacation, take Amy Rollinstall, and travel for an indefinite time. She would begin by going South, — to Washington, Charleston, Atlanta possibly. If she found herself happy, they would run over to Switzerland and spend the summer. In the autumn she would come home, start a hospital for poor girls, and save every drunkard in Salem!

She drew up this practical and hopeful programme without consulting Nordhall. When her plans were fully laid, she sent for him, one yielding April day, — when light was soft, and thought obedient, and feeling gentle, — to tell him what she was going to do, and to bespeak his Godspeed. She was not without some fear how her purpose would strike him.

It was one of the days we sometimes have as May approaches, with a heart throb of midsummer

in the veins of spring. It would have been oppressively warm, but for the afternoon sea-breeze. There had been thunder in the night and a heavy morning shower. The tender grass was vivid and wet. The bulbs in the garden were sprouting like jets of green fire from the moist, brown garden loam. Jacobs had been at work half the afternoon over Madam Strong's hollyhocks, which seemed to him to be growing old. The tall brown one was feeble. Jacobs thought it would die. He nursed it tenderly. He fancied the flowers missed their old mistress. The rose and the gold and the silver white would blossom in the summer; but they, too, he thought, showed signs of age. They were experienced hollyhocks. Jacobs treated them with respect, and Kaiser smelt anxiously of every one. Janet came out with blue ribbons on, and was a long time dusting the front steps. She and Jacobs chatted across the budding garden in merry, but deferent voices.

Mrs. Strong and Miss Snow watched them from the garden paths.

"*They* make the idyl," said Myrtle, a little wistfully. The weather had won upon the caprices of the two ladies, and they had ventured into summer dresses. Myrtle looked like a blue-

bell in her thin stuffs. Reliance wore white that day, and Myrtle had teased her into laying aside the hot black ribbons. The yellowish laces melted against her throat.

"There 's going to be another shower!" cried Myrtle, suddenly. "Come down to the beach and see it gather. We shall get back in time."

Reliance, after a moment's hesitation, assented, and bade Janet bring them wraps. She expected Nordhall, now, every moment, but did not like to refuse Myrtle for such a reason. They got themselves into their things, and ran down over the marshes with Kaiser, as if they had all three been girls — or dogs — together. The shower *was* coming. Reliance looked back over her shoulder at the garden, where Janet and Jacobs stirred in the sun. The burning green started out against the black loam, but on the trees that overhung the house a cloud of green mist settled. Jacobs was singing now, that favorite song of his, — the "petunia song."

"Hear him!" cried Myrtle.

> "Hasten, my heart, and greet her,
> *Loth and late, loth and late, though she be!*"

Myrtle echoed the refrain in her cultivated soprano. The wind caught it, and carried it back.

There was no sun before them. Seaward, the sky gloomed. The beach was a dull white; the heart of the waves malachite, opaque, and forbidding. The gulls' wings turned from white to pearl, to ash, to iron, to black, to pearl again; one, like a silver boat, drifted against a lamp-black cloud. The waves suddenly grew black, with edges of white fire.

"We cannot dare any more," said Reliance breathlessly. "We must turn here."

They stood for a minute, wind beaten and excited, poised on the crest of the cliff, still a quarter of a mile from the water's edge.

"I wonder what was the use of coming," commented Myrtle, philosophically, as they set their faces homewards.

"We 've *seen* it," said Reliance.

"And lost it," said Myrtle.

Reliance shook her head. The sea was there. It was not necessary to sweep and beat against the gale to point it out. Whether one fought, or whether one fled, wave of black and crest of fire flashed and thundered on the white, deserted beach.

The two women retreated before the shower, and came running lightly, fair and flushed, mer-

rily back into the now darkening garden. Janet had gone in to shut windows. Jacobs was covering some tender bulbs. The half-clothed trees tossed wildly. All the scene had grown dull and strange. Kaiser went into the house first, and came bounding out to tell Mrs. Strong that she had company. She said, —

"Yes, yes, Kaiser. I know."

Nordhall appeared when he heard their voices, and the four sat on the piazza in the unseasonable and unreasonable sultriness, and watched the advance of the storm.

When the lightning struck, Myrtle slipped away. She had theories about putting your bedstead into four tumblers when showers came in April. But it was not necessary to explain all one's scientific views.

Reliance did not want to move. She was still excited. She watched for the flash, and the thunder gave her electric strength.

A dart of terrible and tender color, crimson fire, pierced the zenith, and the unreal light played long and luridly over her.

"Come in!" said Nordhall, imperiously. "I can't have you expose yourself like this." She obeyed him reluctantly, and they went into the

darkened parlor. She would not sit down, but moved from window to window, looking fantastic in her strange costume, — her thick woolen cape and cambric dress.

"I believe you 've got the storm in you!" muttered Nordhall.

"Then it will pass by," she said in a low voice. They did not speak to each other again till the shower was over, but sat silent and separate in the unnatural light and dark. Nordhall watched the strange colors play over her, — blue and scarlet and ghostly white. Her cape had slipped off, and every caprice of the lightning was taken up by her white dress. Kaiser crept close to her, a little frightened by the thunder, which was terrific. She stroked his head with that absent-minded tenderness which some women expend on anything that seeks their protection. The dog kissed her wrist profusely.

"I can't stand it!" cried Nordhall suddenly, between the lessening peals of thunder. "I wish you would n't let that dog touch you so!"

He had the masculine aversion to seeing women spoil their pets; in this case it seemed a cruel waste of feeling. He was irrationally annoyed and rasped. He was jealous of Kaiser.

"I — did not notice," said Reliance gently. "Was Kaiser making himself disagreeable? I was thinking of the thunder. There — Kaiser — good fellow — kisses enough, Kaiser! Go and lie down. Go!"

She took the dog's head between her slender hands. Her dismissal to the animal was an endearment a man might have died for.

"Such tenderness!" breathed Nordhall half audibly. He thought how her capacity for tenderness gave splendor and power to this gentle woman. If to love, as has been said, is a talent, Reliance Strong had genius.

The storm was over; dying with low cries and sobs, like a superabundant life that had fought hard for itself. The gloom had lifted from the room and from the sky. The scattering drops flashed with an elfin evanescence upon the glass, the grass, the trees. In the distance, where the black heart of the wave had grown green again, and the white fires of the still excited foam burned on the purified, bright beach, the breakers could be heard.

"It is over!" she said, with a sigh. She came and sat down beside him. All her restlessness and some of her strength had passed on with the

lightning. She began to talk with him at once, in a business-like manner, explaining to him why she had sent for him, and what her plans were, and why she wished to carry them into effect; that she was not gaining strength fast enough, that it was silly to be ill, that this seemed to be the only thing she could reasonably do, and that she thought he would like to know (he had always been so kind) about her life, and what she meant to do with it.

He listened to her in silence, leaning his head against the high-backed chair. He looked very tired. She saw this; it made her voice falter once or twice. In the natural, safe sunlight he seemed a different man to her from what he had in the darkness and the storm. She would have been glad to creep up to him and touch his arm, and say, —

"Oh, I am sorry!"

But she had grown too sadly wise. She sat upon the sofa, and folded her hands, and told her tale, and waited distantly to hear what he would say. When she had finished, he nodded once or twice, and said only, —

"Very well."

"You approve of my plans? You think I am acting wisely?" she asked, timidly.

"Oh, very; with extreme wisdom. It is the thing for you to do. I did not look for it, it is true. I did not think *you* would have to go."

"It is not that I *have* to go!" Startled, she flashed at him.

"No, oh no, I understand. It amounts to the same thing. We won't dispute about it. I thought *I* might have to surrender. But I never meant to. And I never have, I thank God for it! I have stayed by you, Mrs. Strong, — and I would have. I have been able to remain and be your faithful friend."

He spoke these simple words with a sad and proud sincerity which went to her heart. Her eyes filled. They looked miserably at one another.

"Since it *is* so," said Nordhall, "and you are the one to go — I think — it may be better for me — to feel a little freer than I have. It would cost me some pain to hang around here these last few weeks before you start, and I don't see that I could help you any. If I could, it would be another thing."

"You always help me," she quivered, "but I don't want you to stay. I don't want you to make sacrifices . . . . for me. . . . . I don't deserve them."

"You deserve more than I can give," he replied, gravely. "But I have — taxed my courage somewhat. I think I had better get away at once. You would n't want me to stay and make blunders, and lose my wits, and bother you. I think, myself, we had better part, for a time at least, — and immediately. The strain" —

"Has it been so great a strain?" she asked, pitifully. "You are so silent and unselfish — I am so selfish. . . . . I do not think."

"It has been pretty hard at times," said Nordhall, patiently.

"Really, then," said Reliance, after some thought, "you would *like* to go where you would not have me to think about, — away from me? This is what you mean?"

"For my own sake, — yes."

"I never asked you to stay by me for my sake!"

"No. It was my privilege."

"And so at last you weary of your privileges? I don't blame you."

"I do not *weary* of them. You cannot understand — I won't go — now — if you wish me not to."

"I wish you to please yourself. I think you

had better go," said Reliance, with a touch of dignity.

"It is child's play for us to be talking like this," answered Nordhall, after an awkward silence.

He turned and looked at her with his fine, faithful eyes. He had not seen her for five years without the tragic colors of her widowhood about her. She seemed to shrink a little from her own white dress, as if she knew how lovely she could be in it. Her hands were folded in her lap, the right above the left. Her eyelashes trembled upon her cheek. The breaking sunlight found her, and brought out suddenly the hidden colors of her hair. It was like an unexpected joy calling forth the concealed capacities of youth. Nordhall could not help smiling when he saw it.

She stirred uneasily, moved back, and put out her hand.

"You can't do it!" he said.

"Do what?"

"You can't push the sun away."

"I only do not mean to be blinded!" said Reliance, with some feeling

"It 's of no use," returned Nordhall, sighing. "We *cannot* get on like this. I think I 'll go

home now. If I can serve you in any way about your plans, you know you have only to command me. You know you have only to speak, — now, or at any time. If I cannot — why, good-by!"

He rose, with a sharp motion, and she looked up, and she saw that he was going, and that he meant it, and that it was all over.

"Oh, wait a minute!" she cried, like a child to a surgeon. He obeyed her instantly; sitting on the sofa beside her.

"It has all been too bad, too bad!" she mourned. "It has been all a mistake. I wonder if it is always so, — if everybody that tries to be friends behaves like this! If it 's *got* to fail, — if a man and woman cannot be all we tried to be; if people who are like other people could, — I mean people like you and me (I don't mean those great persons we talked about at Bethlehem), — I should feel happier, better, if I knew they could."

"I should n't," said Nordhall, in reply to this rather incoherent appeal; "it would n't help *us* any."

"It was such a noble thought," urged Reliance, lifting her head. "I felt as if it made all the world grander. I feel as if so much nobleness had gone out of life."

"The thing has been done," he said, doggedly, "if that 's any comfort to you, by what you call 'people like other people.' I don't think there can be much doubt of that. Some men are stronger than I. All women are not as lovely as you. I don't see that our failure affects the theory. Theorize all you like about it. There *was* something fine about it, I admit."

He looked at her with wistfulness. What a woman she was! Wailing over a dead ideal, concerned about the nobility of the race while he —

His sensitive face changed. Over his soul an April gale came sweeping, He must fight it or flee from it.

"Let me go!" he cried, with savage suddenness; as if she had held him.

She turned her troubled face towards him, all the hurt woman in it, wrapped in a dignity like a trampled lily. She, too, rose, and with a gesture of fine self-possession waved him away.

He went. Across the room, he turned and looked back at her.

"If I do," he cried, "it is forever! I have endured too much. If I come back, I make my own conditions."

She gave him only that fine gesture for his an-

swer. Even then he revered it, and her because of it.

But he said: —

"Very well, then. If you let me go you must live without me."

"Will you say good-by — before" — Her penetrating, sweet voice rang through the room and faltered.

He returned, and held out his shaking hand. She put hers into it without one word, and without a word they parted.

He went. He went like the spirit of the pursued and lost. He pulled his hat over his eyes, and groped down the garden walk, past the hollyhocks, under the horse-chestnuts and the elms, to the syringa bushes, where the faint, sickly smells of the unripe buds yielded themselves to the evening air. It seemed to him to have grown very dark. Indeed, the twilight had come on. He stopped in the syringa arbor to gather life.

Kaiser came to him while he stood there, and whined. He looked at the setter stupidly. Kaiser, it was evident, had something to say. Nordhall remembered that he had not made his adieus to the dog.

"Good-by, Kaiser," he said, thickly.

But Kaiser did not accept this apology. The dog turned and walked a little way up the garden path, looked over his shoulder at Nordhall, came back, and walked up the path again.

It occurred to Nordhall then that Kaiser desired him to return to the house.

He pushed the dog away from him and strode out of the gate, letting it slam as he passed through.

At this moment the consciousness of an unusual sound struck upon his excited senses. He stopped. It was like a woman's voice.

He thought he could distinguish words. "Charley Nordhall! *Charley Nordhall!*" He took a wild step back into the April night. The young moon was just climbing up from the sea, but only served as yet to emphasize the darkness.

Was that an outline, white as a wraith, real as a woman, mistily moving among the budding trees? Did it retreat? He advanced. Did it hasten? He pursued. Did it wave him back with that rare dignity? Too late now! Too late to stay a man by the turn of a soft wrist! Too late for repentance, wraith were you or woman! Too late, too late, for fear, or memory, or thought!

He strode on like fate, and burst into the half-lighted room. The door was open into the hall. She stood within it, startled, panting, in her white dress. Had she never left the spot? Her vision, was it, that had beckoned? Oh, they had followed visions long enough. She at least was here, and she was real.

"Did you send Kaiser to call me?" But she answered him not a word.

"*Did you send Kaiser to call me back?* I will be answered!"

"Oh, I did, I did!"

She bowed her broken face. Both her hands received and shielded it. It was too dark for him to have seen its expression of entreaty, wild as an eternal regret.

"And did you speak my name? Was it *you* who called?"

"Oh, don't ask me! *It was bad enough to send Kaiser.* It was"—

It was heaven on earth, at least, to him. If to her it was earth after heaven, what cared he?

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